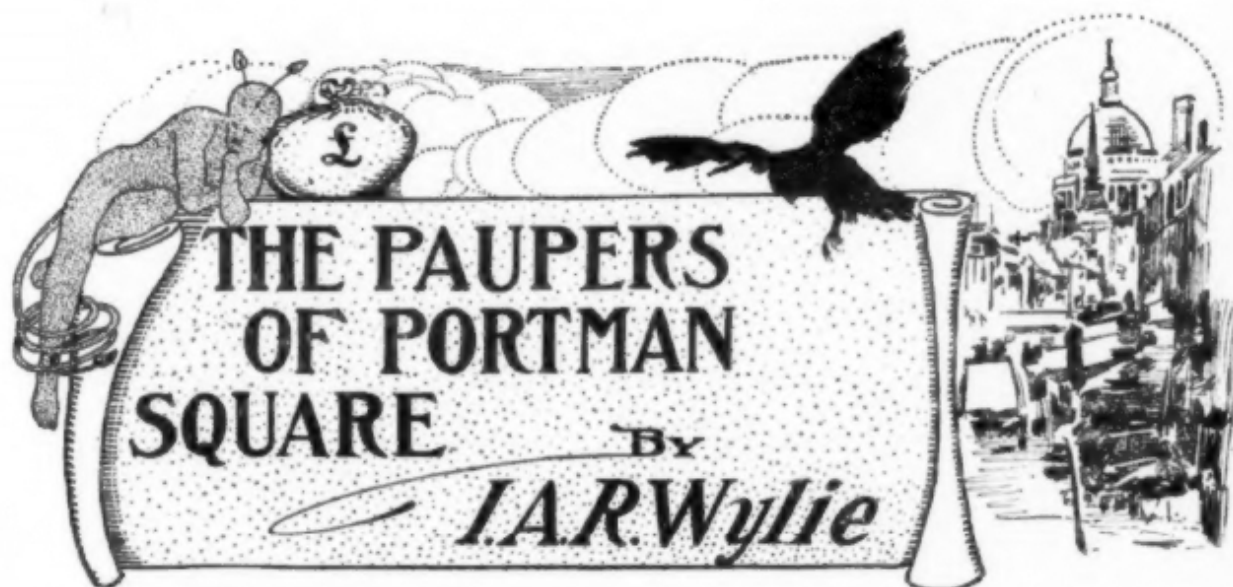


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CHAPTER I.

THE folding doors of the dining room were thrown open, and a proud, clean-shaven individual in immaculate black ushered in another still more immaculate frock-coated individual. The frock-coated one seated himself at the breakfast table, and allowed himself to be waited on by his attendant, he meanwhile arranging his eyeglass, and considering his bulky correspondence with an expression of the most extreme languor.

"Charles!"

"Monsieur?" The proud one immediately became a statue of respectful attention.

"Charles, there is no letter from South Africa."

Charles' expression betokened surprise and profound regret.

"Charles, why isn't there a letter? I have been expecting one."

The fact that his master should have to expect something which refused to

come seemed to oppress Charles with a strong emotion of mingled sympathy and indignation. His shoulders dropped deprecatingly.

"Perhaps by ze next mail, monsieur," he suggested, as though trying to excuse a laggardly fate.

Mr. Heathcote St. John sighed, and sipped his tea.

"Charles!"

"Monsieur?"

"What do I intend doing to-day?"

"Ze Carlton at twelve, monsieur."

"H'm, yes. Where is your mistress?"

The necessity of answering this new problem was taken from the much-afflicted gentleman's gentleman. At that moment the side door opened, as though impelled by a gust of wind, and Mrs. St. John entered in person. At first glance there did not seem much of her, except that which was composed of silks and most dainty nothings, but when one had successfully mastered these details one became aware of a small, pretty, and most energetic face. Curiously enough, however, the energy,

like her stormy entrance, seemed to have no substantial effect on the bored atmosphere. On the contrary, it continued to thicken.

Mr. St. John rose politely, and bowed his wife a formal "Good morning," to which she responded by a gracious, if rather absent, smile. Then both busied themselves with their breakfast and correspondence until such time as the dignified Charles had taken his departure. Then St. John looked up, and considered his wife for a moment in troubled silence. She appeared engrossed in a document which had the appearance of a portentous bill, and only became aware of her husband's gaze after he had drawn her attention to it by a discreet cough.

"My dear," he began uneasily, "it hasn't come."

"It?" she interrogated, with the same expression of affable indifference.

"I mean—the letter from Uncle Jeremy—in other words, his remittance hasn't come. 'Pon my word, it is most awkward. I am almost worried."

His face more than confirmed the statement, and Mrs. St. John's affable smile disappeared as suddenly and a great deal more naturally than it had come.

"It must have been lost in the post," she declared.

"Most unlikely."

"Or he has forgotten. Tiresome man! How does he think we can manage?"

"I suppose he thinks that he allows us enough to cover over any chance delay, and, 'pon my word"—he pulled his short, fair mustache in supreme disconsolateness—"I suppose he does."

"Nonsense! It was he who wanted us to live in this place, and we have had to keep up our whole style in accordance. Heathcote, you must write to him, and explain. You ought to tell him to send us the money through the bank in the ordinary way. It is humiliating to be treated like children receiving their pocket money. You must tell him——"

"My dear Cecilia, I can't! You forget, I have never seen him since I was

a boy—we are complete strangers to each other. I haven't the right to lay down the law like that."

"Then you hadn't the right to marry me!"

It will be observed that by this time the atmosphere of boredom had begun to vibrate. St. John, unaccustomed to such things, looked blankly across the breakfast table.

"My dear, if you'll excuse my saying so, that sounds as though you had married me for my money——"

"Uncle Jeremy's money," she corrected.

"Well, then, Uncle Jeremy's money—it's all the same thing."

"It's not all the same thing. If it was your money there would not be this fuss; and, besides, then I shouldn't have married you for it."

"I don't understand," her husband complained fretfully.

"I did not expect you would. I merely implied that if it was your money it would probably mean that you had earned it, and if you earned it——" She caught a glimpse of his aghast face, and sank back with a sigh of utter weariness. Possibly the request for immediate attention at the bottom of her lill had helped to exasperate her. "Heathcote, for pity's sake don't look at me in that idiotic way. I'm not asking you to break stones for our daily bread—I know quite well you couldn't even if I did. And, besides, there's no need. I dare say the money will come by the next mail, and we have credit enough. There, don't worry me any more. You make me too tired even to think, and I have so much to do. There is the dressmaker at twelve, Lady Dudley's luncheon party at two, and—oh!" Her voice ended in a smothered scream of horror. "Archibald, you very naughty little boy, what are you doing here?"

Her exclamation had successfully aroused St. John from his dreary contemplation of the teapot. He looked in the direction indicated by his wife's indignant finger, and beheld a spectacle rather ludicrous than terrible. A small figure in an extraordinary assortment

of garments stood in the doorway, and gazed upon them with large eyes of wonderment and distress. It was not that the garments in themselves were anything unusual—they were, in point of fact, everything that a young gentleman's should be—but their decidedly back-to-front arrangement and the outspoken disagreement between the buttons and their respective holes testified to the amateur hand. It was no wonder that Mrs. St. John screamed, and when she had taken in the full enormity of the situation she screamed again—in a lower key.

"Archibald, what *have* you been doing?"

"Crying," the intruder answered, with a faint pride.

"That was still naughtier of you. Where's nurse?"

"Dunno."

"You should know. Go and find her, and tell her to dress you properly. You have no business to be here."

She gathered up her letters as she spoke, and appeared to forget his existence. Archibald St. John did not obey. He looked at her, and from her to his father. The latter's good-looking but languid features took on an expression of shamefaced sympathy.

"What's the matter, little chap?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"I'm five," said Archibald loudly and distinctly, but with a faint quaver in his small voice.

"Glad to hear it. That's a grand age. Nearly a man, aren't you?"

Archibald listened to his elder's platitudes with a pained disgust. There was even a sparkle in his eyes, which would have warned both parents if they had known anything about five-year-old people—which they did not.

"It's my birthday," he said, and the quaver amounted to a break.

Husband and wife looked at each other, vaguely embarrassed.

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. St. John. "Nonsense!"

"And nurse said that everybody who was good got presents on their birthday," Archibald went on, with the determination of despair, "and I *was*

borned—nurse said so—and I *am* good."

He made no offer to procure a witness to testify to this last statement—perhaps he looked upon it as incontrovertible—but two large tears rolled lugubriously down his flushed cheeks, thereby producing unexpected results. Mrs. St. John rose, and rang the bell vigorously; her husband took out a gold piece from his waistcoat pocket, and held it out with an awkward kindness.

"There, Archie," he said. "Run and buy yourself something, for Heaven's sake, and——"

"Don't be absurd, Heathcote!" his wife interrupted. "What can the child do with money? You are not tipping a waiter. Archibald, run away! You'll see to-night—what's his name?—Santa Claus—no, not Santa Claus—I mean, a fairy will bring you something lovely if you're good."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

She bent down to him to kiss him, but in her hurry she missed his cheek, and kissed air instead, and swept off, as she had come, like a whirlwind of rustling silks and sweet-smelling perfumes.

Father and son stood and looked at each other in silence. Of the two, St. John was vastly the more embarrassed. Even after he had patted his tie and polished his eyeglass he found nothing particular to say, and the tear-filled eyes fixed steadily on his face caused him a positive discomfort. In truth, this solemn, unhappy atom of humanity was a stranger to him. It came, like a fleeting gleam of sunshine, in and out of his life—a pleasing enough little object, but one which had no part in himself, which stood outside all his interests, his horses, his clubs, his many friends, lastly—his wealth.

It pleased him to have a son as it pleased him to have a pretty wife; they were agreeable appendages to show to the rest of the world, but he did not need them—nor they him. And he certainly had no idea what he was supposed to do with a crying child. Yet he felt vaguely guilty, and in his guilt he flew to the one resource which had

never yet failed him in his intercourse with his fellow creatures. He once more produced a sovereign, and pressed it into his son's sticky hand.

"There, little chap!" he said. "Ask nurse to buy you something nice with that—something you've been wanting."

"But the fairy will come, too?" Archibald asked doubtfully.

His father either did not hear or did not understand. In any case, he was too self-occupied to bother.

"Of course, of course," he said.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

At that moment Heathcote St. John remembered his club appointment. Awkwardly enough, but with an attempt at kindly playfulness, he swung his small son into the air, and placed him on the rug by the fire, thereby clearing his own passage to the door. Unfortunately, his playfulness was based on the supposition that five-year-old legs are of the steadiest, which they are not. Dazed by his sudden flight through the air, Archibald tottered, and tumbled with an unpleasant bump against the fender. Naturally he cried—for the second time that morning—and it was a miserable, sobbing bundle of miscellaneous garments which the housemaid found five minutes later, when it occurred to her to answer her mistress' summons.

"Well, I never! If it isn't Master Archibald!" she said, and proceeded to remedy matters by shaking him like a small sack of potatoes. "Well, I never! What would the mistress say? What put it into your head to come down here, you naughty boy?"

"It's my birthday," he said drearily.

"Your birthday?" She considered him a moment, and possibly the pathos of the empty-handed little figure standing in the midst of a reckless luxury dawned upon her, for her peevish, impatient expression softened. She picked him up more gently than was her wont.

"You're a grass orphan—that's what you are," she said, as she bore him off. "I always says it."

"What's a grass orphan?" he queried

anxiously, but the housemaid did not consider it necessary to reply.

CHAPTER II.

The nurse and the housemaid were seated by the nursery fire, talking over the ways of mankind in general, and the ways of footmen in particular. Consequently their sole reason for being in the nursery at all was completely forgotten, and had been allowed to wander off at his own free will. His own free will had taken him to the drawing-room.

It was still his birthday, but no fairy had come, so far as he knew, and the drawing-room presented his last desperate hope. It had occurred to him that visitors were always shown into the drawing-room, and that possibly the fairy had been waiting there all the afternoon. Moreover, it was a place of dainty, intangible things—essentially like his mother—and surely most likely to attract fastidious persons as, he was certain, fairies were bound to be.

On the whole, it was a dangerous adventure on which he was bound. In the first place, the drawing-room was forbidden territory for him, except on such unpleasant occasions when he was brought in to be admired; in the second place, he had a strong aversion to the dark, and evening had already set in. The first matter he managed to persuade his conscience to overlook; the second was to some extent mitigated by the companionship of a fierce-looking tin soldier, calculated to inspire fear into the stoutest goblin heart.

Thus he entered the drawing-room with a certain confidence, which changed suddenly to a mingled alarm and hope. A bright light burned at the far end.

If some older and consequently superior person had been present, he or she would instantly have discovered that the light came from a softly shaded electric lamp, and would have told Archibald so, adding, as is the way with superior persons, that he was an absurd little boy to imagine absurd things.

But no superior person was present,

and so Archibald made up his mind that the light was a fairy one, and that his fairy visitor was somewhere close at hand. He looked breathlessly from side to side, and, lo and behold! something freed itself from the shadows, and came slowly toward him—a something that was not a fairy, or else fairies were very different persons from what he had imagined. No, undoubtedly it was a goblin—one of his most dreaded enemies—and undoubtedly Archibald, in spite of the tin soldier, would have taken instant flight had not his legs, over which he had never the slightest control, made up their minds to stand there and shake.

Under these trying circumstances, there was nothing for it but to remain and observe the apparition closely. A superior person would have said "a retired greengrocer," but, in spite of an ordinary and strikingly human check suit, Archibald knew that it was a goblin—a goblin in disguise, perhaps, but a goblin for all that. The short, stumpy figure; the round, red face, with the small, deep-set eyes; the rather pointed ears; the wisps of disordered hair—all these characteristics were unmistakable. When it spoke, the matter was settled beyond dispute. It said "Humph!" and in a tone which sent Archibald's heart into the small space of his shoes.

"I—beg your pardon," he began feebly, but diplomatically, conscious that it is always best to be polite, even when on the point of being gobbled up—goblins, and the verb, to gobble, were closely connected in his mind. "I beg your pardon. Did you speak to me?"

"Not as yet," was the gruff answer, "but I intend doing so. Come here, young man."

The legs showing themselves complacent, Archibald walked forward—entirely against his own will—and the goblin laid a thick thumb under his chin.

"Humph!" he said again. "What's your name, anyhow?"

"My name is Archibald," was the more composed answer. "Archibald St. John."

"Not much of a name. Haven't you got anything better than that?"

Archibald recognized this as a "grown-up's" form of pleasantry, and the recognition gave him courage. Even goblins had their human weaknesses, it appeared.

"Susan calls me 'grass orphan,'" he announced proudly.

"Eh?"

Archibald repeated the statement, though with trepidation. The goblin's "Eh?" had been terrific.

"And pray why?" was the next question.

Archibald looked about him, as though he expected the answer to be lurking in a dark corner.

"I don't know," he said despondently. "Susan does, but she won't say."

The goblin was silent for a moment. Then he seated himself, and the fire-light, playing on his face, revealed a decidedly grim expression.

"You seem pretty lonesome," he went on slowly. "Where are your folk?"

"Nurse is upstairs," Archibald answered, with an uneasy glance at the ceiling.

"H'm; never mind nurse. I meant—your pa and ma."

Archibald felt a small thrill of discomfort run down his spine. The "pa and ma" disagreed with him, but he supposed it was the correct thing among goblins.

"Father and mother are out," he said staidly.

"Together?"

"Oh, no!" very decidedly and very surprised.

"Oh, no!" echoed the goblin, with an ironical twist of the eyebrows. "Humph!"

The "Humph!" effectually put an end to the conversation for a moment. Archibald, whose capricious legs declared themselves weary of standing, seated himself cautiously on the footstool opposite his visitor. The latter studied him with knitted brows.

"I suppose you don't know that I have come a long way to see you, Mr. Grass Orphan?" he demanded abruptly.

"Me?" said Archibald, with a movement of pleasure. "Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Then—then perhaps you've come instead of the fairy."

"Of the what?"

"Of the fairy," Archibald repeated, with waning courage.

"I guess you'd better explain," the goblin said, and held his red hands to the blaze.

"You see, it's my birthday," Archibald began.

"I see. Lots of presents and tea fights, eh?"

Archibald shook his head. He had no idea what a tea fight was like, but it sounded dangerous.

"Oh, no. You see, the fairy who brings the presents didn't come in time. I think—I think"—his voice wavered somewhat—"father and mother must have forgotten to tell her—him—it."

"And you think I'm the fairy; is that the idea?"

Archibald's eyes opened to quite twice their natural size.

"Oh, no! You couldn't—I mean—I thought—I thought you were a goblin," he stammered, thoroughly alarmed at his own rudeness.

The visitor threw back his head, and laughed till his red face grew purple, and all Archibald's fears returned with double force.

"So I'm a goblin? Bless my soul—well, and suppose I am? Goblins can do as much as fairies, any day."

"Can they?" asked Archibald politely, thankful that the matter had passed off so pleasantly. "I'm so glad."

"And suppose I came all this way to ask you what you wanted—what would you ask for?"

Archibald's face grew grave. There was a vague wistfulness about his expression as he looked away from his questioner to the fire.

"Can you give me *anything*?" he asked.

The goblin's lips compressed themselves into a grim line.

"I can give you most things that human folk want," he said.

"Then, please, I should like my father and mother to be awfully, awfully fond of me—specially mother."

The goblin sat back in his chair. His jaw had dropped.

"Aren't they?" he demanded.

"Oh, no."

"Too—too fond of each other to bother about a little bit of a thing like you, eh?"

"Oh, no."

"They're not? Why not?"

Archibald gathered together all Susan's and his nurse's wisdom.

"They're too—too blasy," he explained.

"Too what? What the devil is 'blasy'?"

"Fed up," Archibald said, with some pride. "Fed up, you know."

The goblin made a sound that might have passed for a grunt or a groan. His small eyes wandered round the beautiful room, and hardened.

"So you want your folk to be fond of you?" he said. "Why especially your mother?"

"Because she kisses one so nicely," Archibald explained. "She smells so 'sensitive, you know."

"I have not the least doubt," the goblin admitted, with a grim sniff.

He waited a moment, studying the pale, tired, baby face before him. Then he got up, and laid one heavy hand on the frail shoulder.

"Perhaps I can give you what you want," he said. "There was a time—six years ago—when I gave your folk what they wanted, and it doesn't seem to have done them much good, but maybe you want something wiser than they did. At any rate, I'll try. Only"—his face relaxed somewhat—"I'm not a fairy, as you quite rightly decided. I'm only a goblin, after all. Fairies wave their wands and the job's done. Goblins have to go about their work slowly. And you'll have to help—yes, you," he repeated, as Archibald looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. "You'll have to give up things—presents, nice clothes, nice food, nurse, and everything. Can you?"

"Oh, yes!" said Archibald, thinking chiefly of the nurse. "Oh, yes, yes!"

The goblin smiled faintly.

"Well, we'll see. You must trust me,

d'ye hear? And you're not to say anything about me. You're not to say you know me next time we meet. It's a secret between us. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Archibald.

It was past his bedtime, and the world swam in a red glow before his hazy eyes. He had a dim recollection of a kindly pressure on the shoulder, of a thickset figure bending over him. Then all vanished, and he rolled off his stool onto the rug—asleep.

CHAPTER III.

Mrs. Heathcote St. John leaned back in her comfortable brougham with a pleased sigh. It had been a long, but successful, day of what she called hard work. There had been the dressmaker, the luncheon party, the afternoon at the milliner's, and finally the opera and the delicious knowledge that everywhere she had been recognized as "the best-dressed woman in London." Altogether she felt, as she stepped from the carriage, and mounted the steps of the great, solemn-looking house in Portman Square, that she had touched the summit of her ambition. Not even the information that her husband was waiting for her in the drawing-room could altogether cloud her supreme good humor, and she entered the brightly lit room with the assurance of her own success.

Her husband was standing with his back toward her, and he did not immediately turn, but his indifference did not annoy her. In the whirl and brilliancy of her life his admiration and interest had lost their value.

"What is it you want, Heathcote?" she asked fretfully. "You know, it is really thoughtless of you to bother me at this time of the evening. I am so tired that I——"

She broke off in the middle of her sentence. Her husband had at last turned toward her, and his face had startled her out of her self-absorption. It was strangely pale; the expression of foppish boredom was gone, and there was something almost childish in the hopeless wretchedness in his eyes.

"I—asked to see you because I have something of the greatest gravity to tell you," he said hoarsely. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but it won't wait. I've had a letter from Uncle Jeremy's bank—there, you had better read it for yourself."

He held out an open sheet of business paper, and as she took it she saw that his hand trembled.

"I don't understand," she said, with the fretfulness of a vague fear. "I hate business. Why can't you tell me yourself? Only be quick. I'm too tired to stand about waiting——"

"It's very simple," he said, passing his hand unsteadily over his disordered hair. "Uncle Jeremy is ruined—and we have nothing more to expect from him. That's all."

She staggered; then took refuge in a blind refusal to understand.

"Nonsense!" she said. "Nonsense! You are dreaming."

"I wish to Heaven I were!"

His tone convinced her. She came slowly forward, the soft rustle of her dress sounding loud in the absolute, stricken quiet.

"You mean—we are ruined, Heathcote?"

"That's it."

"But the house—our things——"

"There are our debts to pay. All we have won't cover them."

"Penniless, then—what the world calls paupers?"

"Yes—paupers," he echoed dully.

She stretched out her hand, as though to cling to him for support, but he did not see the movement, and she caught hold of the mantelshelf. The marble seemed only to accentuate the whiteness of the small hand, and she looked at the glittering rings upon her third finger with a dazed unbelief. From them she looked at the room, at the costly brocaded furniture, at the valuable paintings, and then down at her own dress. Paupers! The word rang in her ears with a mockery that made her and her whole surroundings seem ludicrous. She looked finally at her husband, and a bitterness that was not far from contempt twisted her pale lips.

"What are you going to do?" she asked curtly.

He shook his head.

"Heaven knows. I shall manage somehow, I suppose. Of course—you will go home—to your mother."

A scarlet wave of color rushed to her cheeks.

"Of course," she said coldly. "What else did you expect me to do?"

"Nothing—nothing." He turned away without lifting his eyes to her face. "Cecilia, please excuse me to-night. I must think matters over. It's a—a good thing you have somewhere you can go."

She gave a short, hard laugh.

"Yes, it's a good thing," she said.

Then suddenly she bent down, and picked up some glittering object on the floor. It was the tin soldier, a little more bent and battered than before, but quite recognizable. Husband and wife looked at it in a silence which became oppressive. Mrs. St. John turned, and went slowly toward the door. The tin soldier was still in her hand.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night."

The door closed behind her, and Heathcote St. John was left alone to face the first catastrophe of his life. Curiously enough, he did not think of that—he thought of the tin soldier. And the tin soldier set fire to a new train of thought. Involuntarily he looked at the clock. It was well past eleven. At this hour five years ago he had been called to his wife's bedside, and had beheld the minute object which they told him was his son. His son! Like faint but growing vibrations from a great emotion, he felt again the almost agonizing relief after the hours of racked suspense, the immense tenderness, the dawning pride.

That night had seemed the crowning hour of his life—for the first time love had risen supreme above every other consideration, above wealth, and luxury, and pride of place. For the first time—and for the last! Then had come the magnificent gifts from magnificent friends, proud Uncle Jeremy's "extra check," and then once more waves had

closed over their heads, and they had forgotten.

To-night he remembered—now that the waves had rolled back, leaving him on a rock of naked ruin. His hundred and one luxuries had been swept away from him; all that remained were his wife and child, and they, too, were lost to him because he had never earned the right to keep them. It was curious how much he cared—before, he had cared nothing or very little. His wife, he knew, did not, and could not, care. She had married him for the wealth that was gone. His child did not, and could not, care. It had been a mere episode in his life, and he had treated it as such. He stood alone, a pauper, stripped of every possession that had made life beautiful.

Without knowing what he did, he switched off the light that revealed to him all the splendor he had lost, and crept softly from the room. He did not know why he went on tiptoe, or why he sought out a part in the great house which he had not once visited in four long years. He was only conscious of a dull pain and an inexplicable longing.

The nursery door stood ajar, and a faint light shone through the narrow space on to the dark passage. He wondered at it, and half drew back, but the pain was stronger than himself. The door answered quietly to his touch, and the next minute he stood on the threshold. He went no farther—the scene before him held him rooted and wordless. A shaded lamp burned on the table, and by its light he saw the small white bed by the wall—and his wife. She stood there, with her hand resting on the pillow, very upright, a vision of the world's luxury, with a face on which pride, and grief, and bitterness strove for the victory.

With an effort, Heathcote drew slowly nearer, and stood opposite her, with the child between them. He had never seen emotion on his wife's face before—or only once in the hour which they had both forgotten; and it was like a revelation—like the revelation of his own pain. In sheer awkwardness, he bent down and touched the boy's cheek

lightly with his finger. He felt that it was moist—as though a tear had fallen but the closed eyelids were dry.

"Cecilia!" he said unsteadily.

She threw back her head, with a movement of self-defiance.

"It was his birthday," she said, "and we forgot."

Their eyes met, and the same thought flashed through the minds of both. It was his birthday—the last birthday on which they could have poured wealth and happiness over him. And they had forgotten.

"Poor little chap!" Heatcote said, under his breath.

A rough, half-smothered sob broke the stillness. He looked up at her again in stricken surprise, and saw that her face was set in rigid, expressionless lines. But the sob had been unmistakable. Was it self-pity or remorse? He did not know, but, obeying an imperative impulse, he came round to her side.

"Cecilia!" he repeated hoarsely. He took her hand, and she did not withdraw it. Rather he felt that she clung to him. "Cecilia—it's hard on you—I'm awfully sorry," he stammered.

Then she broke down, and flung herself by the little bed in an overwhelming passion of grief.

"Poor little fellow!" she cried wildly. "I promised him—and I forgot—and now it is too late!"

He knew then that it had been no self-pity. And he bent and kissed her—for the first time in many months.

She did not know that he had kissed her.

Only the grass orphan smiled in his sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs. Smythe's At Home was in full swing; that is to say, her drawing-room was crowded to overflowing, and the conversation had been skillfully conducted into the channel of the latest scandal—two points which in Mrs. Smythe's mind indicated complete social success. She herself was the center of attention, and her story was listened to with breathless interest by a closely

packed circle of her intimate acquaintance.

"I assure you," she said, in a tone of profound mystery, "I could hardly believe my eyes and ears. You must try and understand exactly how it was. I was standing in Greene & Greene's front room——"

"What sort of shop is Greene & Greene's?" put in a severe voice. "I never heard of it."

Mrs. Smythe glanced in the direction of the speaker.

"It's not a shop, my dear Adelaide," she explained, with deference. "It's an auctioneer's, you know. I had gone in about a sale of old china or something, and was just looking through one of the catalogues when I heard some one talking. You understand—the door was open—I could not help myself—it was most awkward."

"Of course," said a sympathetic parson's wife, evidently intending to assure the speaker of the understanding and approbation of respectability. "Of course—most awkward."

"In fact, I could not help hearing," Mrs. Smythe went on regretfully. "You can imagine—the business had no sort of interest for me. It was all about the selling of a house and furniture in a great hurry—ready money or something of that sort being absolutely necessary. But when I heard Portman Square and the number, you know, I nearly fainted. And five minutes later, who do you think should come out of the inner office—now, who?"

"Who?" yelled the chorus, giving up the riddle, as was expected of them.

"Mr. St. John himself!"

The chorus looked at each other. With one exception their expressions signified an excited delight, covered over with a thin layer of shocked disbelief. The exception was the owner of the severe voice. She sat a little outside the circle, very upright, very handsome in spite of the gray threads which mingled with the black hair, very determined looking, with close-shut lips and keen, sparkling eyes.

"Idiots!" she said, under her breath,

but loud enough for her neighbor to hear if she wanted to.

The parson's wife, as became a member of the cloth, recovered her speech first.

"You mean," she began gaspingly, "you mean the St. Johns are—dear me, what's the horrid word?—bankrupt?"

"Worse than that—paupers," said Mrs. Smythe, whose ideas of bankruptcy included a house in town, a shooting place for the season, and twopence in the pound. "I had it all from my maid. You know, it is *so* unpleasant. Her cousin—at least, she *says* he is her cousin—is footman at St. Johns', and of course she hears everything. And it seems that the St. Johns' uncle—you remember Jeremy Harris, don't you, Adelaide, dear?"

"Adelaide, dear," drew herself up almost imperceptibly.

"I remember him very well," she said, and her bright eyes flashed with an aggressiveness which should have warned Mrs. Smythe that she had been guilty of a faux pas, but Mrs. Smythe and faux pas were so inseparable that she noticed nothing unusual in her guest's expression.

"Well, it seems that he has lost all his money, and of course the St. Johns, being absolutely dependent on him, are ruined. They are trying to keep the matter quiet, but I know for certain that they are selling everything, and that Mrs. St. John is going home to her mother."

The parson's wife sighed.

"Pride comes before a fall," she said piously. "I always knew something would happen to poor Cecilia. Of her one can truly say, 'Mammon was her god,' and I always knew that Jeremy Harris would end badly. I told him so, I remember, a few days before he left for some heathenish place. A scatter-brained, godless——"

"Cat!"

Undoubtedly the word had fallen, crisp and decided, but whence it came, and whether it referred to the iniquitous Jeremy or his critic none knew, and no one ventured to inquire. At any rate, it successfully put a stop to the

conversation. Mrs. Dechesney—otherwise "dear Adelaide"—had risen, and stood looking straight in front of her, with an alarming blankness.

"I'm going," she said. "Good-by."

The chorus rose in a flutter of amiability and uneasiness. Mrs. Smythe was foremost in the effusiveness of her farewell, for "dear Adelaide" was rich, and "dear Adelaide" also lived in Portman Square, and it is well to have as many friends as one can in that desirable neighborhood—if one cannot live there oneself. Mrs. Smythe herself lived "just off Portman Square," but that, as every one knows, unfortunately, is a very different thing. And, besides, one cannot put "just off Portman Square" on one's note paper. So Mrs. Smythe called "dear Adelaide" her best friend, and "dear Adelaide" lived in blissful ignorance of the fact, and called Mrs. Smythe "a silly little thing," or "a fool," according to the state of her own temper, and with absolute indifference as to who heard her.

"My dear, must you really go?" Mrs. Smythe said, holding her guest's hand between both her own. "I had so hoped you would be able to tell us something more about the St. Johns. You used to know Jeremy Harris, didn't you? And you live in the same neighborhood."

"But my maid has no cousins in the household," Mrs. Dechesney interrupted grimly. "That makes a difference. I am sorry that I have nothing to tell you. Good-by."

She went, and the chorus relapsed into a momentary silence, while Mrs. Smythe shook her head sadly and wisely.

"Poor, dear Adelaide!" she said. "Bitter, you know, bitter!"

The chorus signified their full understanding for the hidden depths of this terse comment by means of certain expressive contortions of the mouth and eyebrows, and the parson's wife folded her hands in the correct attitude of resignation.

"Of course, you know," Mrs. Smythe went on, almost in a whisper, "there was something between those two. What it was no one knew, but Jeremy

was of no family whatever—and you know what dear Adelaide is—*so* exclusive. They say, though, that it nearly broke her heart.”

The parson's wife lifted her eyes.

“Ah, pride of birth!” she sighed. “I always said——”

But what the parson's wife said or did not say is of little importance, and in the meantime the object of this interesting conversation had crossed the rubicon, and, having gained the sanctified regions of social greatness, entered her own house. Without waiting to remove hat or coat, she went straight into her boudoir, switched on the light, rang the bell, and ordered the footman out of the room—all of which proceedings would have startled the latter personage very much if he had not been accustomed to the ways of his mistress, who was, as he acknowledged, “crusty and queer, but a real lady at the bottom.”

While waiting for a response to her heated summons, Adelaide Dechesney looked about her with a strange curiosity. It was almost as though she noted the beautiful details of the room for the first time, and there was an expression about her face, half bitter, half wistful, which at once accentuated the classic perfection of her features, and laid stress upon her age. For it was an attractive expression, but the expression of a woman who looks back rather than forward.

She was so absorbed in her own thoughts that the gray-haired servant who entered the room a few minutes later only succeeded in drawing her attention after a long series of discreet coughs. Adelaide Dechesney turned abruptly.

“Jane,” she said, “if I am not mistaken there is an unfurnished room at the top of the house. Is that so?”

“Yes, ma'am, and it's a real shame that——”

“A nice room, Jane?”

“As nice as any in the whole house, ma'am.”

“Suitable for a nursery?”

“For a—a——”

“A nursery, I said. Jane, don't gape. We're going to have a child.”

The old servant looked round helplessly, and her eye rested on the door with a decided nervousness.

“A—a child—we?” she gasped incoherently. “If you please, Miss Adelaide—I mean—ma'am——”

“Now, Jane, don't stammer, and don't say you don't understand; I never expected you to. Just try and grasp the fact that this time next week you will have a small boy of five to look after, and you'll feel clearer in your head.”

Either Jane could *not* grasp the fact, or the grasping process did not have the prescribed effect. At any rate, her expression of bewildered horror deepened.

“Please—a little boy,” she jerked out. “I don't know anything about little boys——”

“Nor do I, Jane; but we're going to learn. I shall see about everything tomorrow—everything must be in perfect order—for, you see, the little boy is to be my son.” She seemed to take a grim pleasure in her maid's increasing discomfort, but she cut short all interrogation with a wave of the hand. “Jane, you're going to ask silly questions. Don't! I've said all I want to say—you can go.”

The old servant turned tail and fled.

Adelaide Dechesney caught a glimpse of her own face in the glass.

“My son!” she said aloud, and smiled.

CHAPTER V.

“If you please, Mr. St. John, I should be glad to run over the things in the drawing-room. My catalogue says Sèvres and Dresden china ornaments. If it wouldn't be troubling you——”

The square-built, decidedly commonplace-looking man with the untidy notebook left his sentence unfinished, and tiptoed gingerly into the room which had been thrown open for him. Mr. St. John followed him passively, and then cursed under his breath. His wife was standing at the far end of the room, her head bowed; but as the two men entered she drew herself upright, and faced them—a miserable little figure, with flushed face and eyes bright with tears and resentment.

"You might have knocked, Heathcote!" she began stormily. "You know——"

"My dear, this is Mr.—Mr. Samuels, from Greene & Greene's, you know," St. John broke in hastily. "You know—about the china."

She made no answer, but stood watching the intruder with contracted eyebrows and furious eyes. On his round of the luxurious room he sniffed, and while contemplating her favorite Dresden shepherdess he even blew his nose loudly—a piece of disrespect which caused Mrs. St. John to bite her lips in a paroxysm of impotent rage.

Her husband watched her with the helplessness of despair, realizing in an indefinite sort of way—he was not given to thinking things out—that a considerable gulf of feeling, if not of time, separated both of them from that night of catastrophe when he had found her crying by Baby Archibald's bedside.

The first enthusiasm of grief and self-reproach was over, the wings of a passing remorse hung limp in the gray, dank atmosphere of reality, and she at least was facing matters very much as a woman of her type would face them—with a petulant, childish revolt.

As for St. John, in spite of the fact that he himself was in "a devil of a mess," as he would have described his own state, he felt something that was like pity for the pretty, unhappy woman-child who stood frowning miserably at the wreck of her favorite toys. "It was a deuced shame!" he reflected, in his choice vernacular. "A deuced shame!" He got no farther than that piece of wisdom, partly because he hated tracking down the "whys" and "wherefores," and partly because Mr. Samuels, of Greene & Greene's had finished his inventory.

"And now the dining room, if you wouldn't mind," he said, with a fat sigh of content. "Sorry to have troubled you, ma'am. Good afternoon!"

Mrs. St. John made no response, but her husband making a movement as though to accompany the unwelcome guest, she caught his arm in a grip of nervous strength, and held him back.

He saw that her face was scarlet, and that her nostrils quivered with an almost hysterical emotion, and with an instinctive dread of publicity he closed the door.

"Cecilia," he began, faintly protesting.

"Don't! Heathcote—when are the things to be sold? I mean, when must they—we—go?"

"On the twentieth. Greene & Greene's said——"

"Heathcote—it isn't possible. Oh, Heathcote!" She shook his arm in a storm of uncontrolled revolt. "I can't bear it! I simply can't bear it! I can't face things—I can't go back to the old, stuffy life at home! It's too much to ask of me. Can't you do something? Can't you make money? Oh, Heathcote, do *anything*!"

He patted her very much as he would have patted Baby Archibald's head, with about the same degree of understanding, and the same desire to express sympathy.

"Cecilia, my dear girl, I would do anything—give up anything. Only—dash it all, there's nothing of mine to give up, and as for doing anything—never did anything in my life."

"No, that's true." She smiled faintly and sarcastically. "Heathcote," she went on, with a sudden movement that was almost defiant, "there are your stables—your race horses—you used to say they were worth a small fortune."

"They're gone," he answered, with averted face. "Put up for auction yesterday."

He coughed as though to cover up an uncomfortable hoarseness, and a new expression came into his wife's face. She drew back a little, and regarded him with a vague wonder and comprehension.

"Your horses!" she repeated dully. "Your favorites——"

"If you please, ma'am, Mrs. Dechesney to see you."

The footman stood on the threshold, an image of offended and injured dignity. His manners were as gentlemanly as ever, but every line in his face expressed the consciousness that disgrace

hovered in the air, and that, having the misfortune to have been one of the family, it reflected itself on him.

Mrs. St. John made a movement of protest. It came too late. Adelaide Dechesney brushed the footman on one side, and closed the door firmly and decidedly in his face, once and for all proving to that august person that she was no lady, and never would be one.

"I knew you wouldn't see me," she observed, with businesslike calm, "so I came in before you said so. I hope you won't mind more than you can help."

Mrs. St. John did not answer—the expression of wonder was still in her wide-open eyes—and her husband came hastily to the rescue.

"You know—we are always pleased to see you," he said. "Sit down by the fire. We shall have tea in a moment." He rang the bell energetically. "Tea!" he ordered, as the footman's red and insulted face once more appeared in the doorway. "Tea at once!"

The footman vanished. Adelaide Dechesney seated herself in her decided way in the chair which St. John had drawn up for her. Her lips were tightly compressed, her eyes bright.

"Heathcote St. John," she began abruptly, "I know you very well, and I knew your uncle more years ago than it is agreeable to remember. I feel myself one of the family, therefore, and intend to act as such. In other words, I have come to make myself unpleasant. Is it true that Jeremy Harris is ruined, and you with him?"

Heathcote felt wildly for his tie pin. His eyes were fixed on his wife's angry, humiliated face.

"Eh," he began. "Eh——"

"If you please, sir"—it was the footman again—"cook says the tea has run out, and as she was told not to order in anything fresh——"

"Go to the devil!" said Heathcote St. John, in low, concentrated accents.

The footman went—whether or not to the destination assigned to him by his irate master is not known—and there was a blank, uncomfortable silence.

"I'm awfully sorry," Heathcote began

at last, with a kind of wretched frankness. "You see——"

"Yes, I see," Adelaide Dechesney interrupted crisply. "You don't need to answer my question. Of course, I might tell you how sorry I am, and all that sort of nonsense, but I haven't time, and it wouldn't help you much. Instead, I'm going to be impertinent, and ask more questions. What do you propose doing?"

"My wife is going home to her mother in Shropshire," St. John answered, thankful to be able to speak about one point at least with an appearance of businesslike clearness.

"And then I suppose when you have retired into the country to milk cows, or whatever one does there, while your husband runs odd errands for some office——"

"Don't!" Cecilia burst out. "We don't want you to sympathize, but you needn't—needn't——"

She broke off, battling against a threatening flood of tears, and Adelaide Dechesney smiled a smile of placid wisdom.

"My dear, I'm enjoying the luxury of being unpleasantly truthful, because I know I can pay for it. I am going to do something which, I suppose, never occurred to a friend before—I propose to help you."

Mrs. St. John's eyes opened wide, with an almost childish flash of hope, but her husband shook his head. He could not help himself, and, being a man, he could not see how a woman could perform something beyond his powers.

"I'm afraid——" he began courteously.

"Please don't interrupt. Would five thousand pounds a year be of any use to you for the time being?"

"My dear Mrs. Dechesney, it's tremendously good of you, but it's out of the question. I could not accept money—not even borrowed money——"

"My dear Mr. St. John, did I say anything about borrowed money? Seriously, do you think you have any security worth offering? Don't be foolish. I merely propose buying some-

thing from you at a price which I don't think will be outbidden."

Mrs. St. John looked wildly and instinctively at her rings; her husband, being wiser, at the valuable pictures on the wall.

"I'm afraid——" he began again, but his visitor interrupted him with a curt gesture.

"I want Baby Archibald," she said.

They looked at her in blank, stupid silence, and she repeated her words slowly and with clear enunciation.

"I want Baby Archibald," adding: "When you've grasped that fact we can get on."

"You mean"—it was Mrs. St. John who this time recovered her speech first—"you mean—we—we should give you *our* son?"

"At the rate of five thousand pounds a year I should say 'sell,'" observed Mrs. Dechesney. "Still, we won't quarrel over a word, and perhaps 'give' *does* sound nicer. At any rate, there's my offer. I want something young about me, and I'm fond of that baby—at least, as fond as I can be of anything—and I'm prepared to do well by him and by you. So long as I live he shall be amply provided for, and you will be in steady receipt of the income I have already mentioned. At my death Archibald will receive the bulk of my fortune, with the provision that he continues the usual payment to you. Of course, five thousand pounds may not keep you in quite your present style, but——"

"Don't!" said Mrs. St. John, for the second time, but in another tone. Her knees shook under her, and she stretched out her hand blindly for support. "Don't! One doesn't sell one's own son!"

A grim, rather sarcastic smile twisted Adelaide Dechesney's composed lips.

"No, as a rule, one doesn't," she admitted. "But you mustn't let the *convenances* get in your way—they are so easily arranged. Let us suppose, for instance, that you decided to travel in India for a few years. Baby Archibald could not possibly accompany you, and what would be more natural than that you should entrust him to an old friend

of the family like myself? And when you *do* come back—why, all sorts of things might have happened. Archibald might have set up an attachment for me, and forgotten all about you—a splendid excuse to give the busybodies. You see, it is perfectly simple."

Mrs. St. John sat down opposite the woman, whose clear, steady voice had put unthought-of possibilities before them with the precision of a lawyer. She was now deadly pale, and her eyes were fixed on the fire, as though she were afraid to lift them. Her husband took hold of the edge of the mantelpiece, seemingly in an attempt to steady himself.

"One's own flesh and blood——" he began hoarsely.

"Heathcote St. John, don't talk sentiment to me! People who live in Portman Square should be above all that sort of feelings. They are altogether plebeian. And if you must have feelings at all, try and be unselfish for once in your life, and think of Baby Archibald. You owe that child something. You brought him into the world without so much as a 'by your leave,' and what have you to offer him? Nothing. And what do I offer him? Everything. You will admit, being civilized people, that money and all money means is everything?"

She waited a moment, looking from one to the other, with a curious look that was not altogether unlike that of suspense, but neither husband nor wife answered.

"Come!" she went on impatiently. "Say something. Isn't it true?"

Mrs. St. John started as though from a dream, and looked at her husband. Their eyes met for a fleeting moment of question and answer.

"Of course," Heathcote said firmly. "Of course."

Mrs. St. John took a sharp breath.

"Of course," she said; "and, besides, there is Archibald to consider." She spoke quickly, with a curious but scarcely noticeable catch in her voice. "After all, we have nothing to offer him, and he is spoiled; he will miss things so; one does miss things so."

Heathcote nodded.

"We must be fair to him; and he won't miss us much, poor little chap. Only we can't accept the rest of your suggestion."

"So it's pride now?" asked Adelaide Dechesney. "Really, it is just as though you were trying to run through the whole gamut of correct emotions, and it is so unnecessary—between old friends. You don't suppose I'm going to buy things and not pay for them? Don't be absurd! It's five thousand pounds a year and Baby Archibald's future, or nothing and no future for anybody. I hope you know by this time that I am accustomed to meaning what I say."

Mrs. St. John rose suddenly to her feet.

"And—and if we consented—could I—we see him sometimes?"

"By all means—if you didn't interfere."

Again husband and wife looked at each other with the same intense, unspoken question. Adelaide Dechesney stared steadily into the fire, and only the sharpest observer would have noticed the bitter smile which passed like a shadow over her lips.

"Heathcote——" Mrs. St. John began faintly.

"I think—we have not the right to refuse," her husband went on, almost as though to prevent her speaking. "I believe—I know—that you'll be everything that's good to—our son—more than we've been to him, probably—and——"

Mrs. Dechesney rose, and stood stiff and erect, her eyes shining like two sharp points of light.

"Putting aside appropriate sentimentalities, I understand that you consent," she said. "Is that so?"

The shortest possible hesitation.

"Yes, that's so," Heathcote answered.

"I presume that you will start on your travels shortly. In that case, I should like to receive Archibald some days before you go. You could help smooth over the change."

Heathcote put his hand to his collar.

"On the eighteenth, then?"

"That will suit me very well." She held out her hand. "And now I suppose I need not express my sympathy. People with five thousand a year don't require sympathy, do they?"

He gave a short, uneasy laugh.

"No, of course not."

She refused the offer of his escort with a curt gesture.

"On the eighteenth I shall have everything ready; also the check for the first year," she said. "Good-by."

She went out, and the door closed behind her with an ominous, threatening bang. Husband and wife were left standing opposite each other.

"We're out of the mess, anyhow," Heathcote said.

"Yes; out of the mess," she echoed.

But this time they avoided each other's eyes.

CHAPTER VI.

Baby Archibald was playing "bears" in the passage, and as he was accustomed to playing that adventurous game without the disagreeable element of the bears themselves, he screamed when the drawing-room door opened suddenly, emitting a tall, dark something which might, with the help of a little imagination, have been taken for a grizzly. The gun having missed fire, Baby Archibald was about to make discretion the better part of valor, when a firm, not unkindly, hand caught him by the shoulder, and turned him round.

"Come, now, you know who I am," said Adelaide Dechesney. "You frightened little fellow, what are you doing?"

"Killing bears," Archibald explained, with recovered dignity. "The place is full of them, you know."

"Yes, I know," she said. "In that case, perhaps you'd be so kind as to see me downstairs; I'm naturally of a nervous disposition."

The proposition met wholly with Archibald's approval. It was getting dusk, and the imaginary wild beasts were becoming substantial realities in proportion to the deepening of the shadows, so that he was not at all unwilling to act as escort to a large, safe-looking

person. So he thrust his small, somewhat hot hand into hers, and proceeded down the passage.

It was a long passage, and a beautiful one in so far that the walls were covered with valuable pictures, which stared down at the passer-by with a pompous consciousness of their own worth. Possibly Adelaide Dechesney proved one too much for them, for she returned their gaze with a contemptuous criticism.

"Tell me, Archie," she said—she was one of the few who ever reduced his name from its full-length dignity—"would you mind if you had to leave all these pretty things?"

Archibald looked up, vaguely surprised at this repetition of a question which he had answered once before.

"Oh, no," he said. "I've got to, you know."

"You've got to? What do you mean?"

"It's a secret," said Archibald mysteriously. "A big secret."

"Whose secret, you extraordinary little boy?"

"Mine and——"

He stopped short, and clasped the cool hand in a spasm of alarm. They had turned the corner of the passage, and a single electric light burning over a valuable "Old Master" revealed the figure of a man who was gazing up, notebook in hand.

"Jer——"

"Gob——"

The two broken and wholly unintelligible exclamations escaped simultaneously, and the man turned with a start, his red, bulldog face half amused, half alarmed.

"I beg your pardon," he began, and shut his notebook. "I beg your pardon but——"

"Would you mind telling me what you are doing here?" Adelaide Dechesney interrupted, with dignity.

"With pleasure. I am taking a memorandum of the pictures. This one, for instance——"

"Thank you. I know considerably more about that picture than you do. I want to know what you are doing here."

The man in the ill-fitting brown suit shuffled.

"If you please, I'm Samuels, of Greene & Greene's, auctioneers," he explained meekly. "I'm valuing things." At the same time he glanced at Archibald, and one eye closed surreptitiously. "May I offer you my card?"

"No, thank you. And pray, Mr. Samuels"—she gave the name a sarcastic emphasis—"who else may you be?"

"A ruined man, trying to earn an honest penny," he said. "I—I hope, Adelaide, you won't give me away."

"My name is now Mrs. Dechesney," she corrected frigidly. "As to 'giving you away,' I really don't know what you mean. You don't mean to tell me no one knows?"

"No one," he said, and his voice sank with mysteriousness, while his eye rested on Archibald. "There's only one person who *really* knows who I am, and he is under an oath of secrecy."

Archibald's small face lit up for a moment, but he said nothing, and there was a strained silence. Mrs. Dechesney stared at Mr. Samuels, and Mr. Samuels stroked his shabby coat collar apologetically.

"I'm afraid I've changed," he said. "I'm not as handsome as I was."

"H'm! Were you ever handsome?"

"I flattered myself—but, of course, time does deal unkindly with a bankrupt bachelor. You, Mrs. Dechesney, have grown, if anything, more beautiful. I hope Mr. Dechesney is well?"

"Mr. Dechesney is dead," she said, with increasing severity.

"Oh!" He did not apologize, and his "Oh!" did not express any particular degree of regret. "And now I suppose you are acting as comforting angel in this house of desolation?" he went on.

"On the contrary, I'm buying from the wreckage."

"Oh, that comes into my sphere, doesn't it?" He slapped open his notebook. "Let me see——"

"Look it up under 'babies,'" she suggested.

"I beg your pardon."

"I said 'babies,'" she repeated. "As

a matter of fact, though, the auction is over, so you don't need to interfere."

"You mean"—all the color had gone out of his ruddy face—"you mean they've sold——"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"Their own flesh and blood?"

"Oh, my dear Jer—Mr. Samuels, how can you be so commonplace! That's just what they said, and lots of other pretty, sentimental things besides. Of course, they don't do it for their own sakes, you understand. That sort of people never does. Their powers of self-sacrifice are quite overwhelming."

"I don't believe it!"

"What don't you believe—the sale? Do you know what a nice, clean, well-brought-up baby costs nowadays? You don't? You're a pretty sort of auctioneer, aren't you? Price of one baby—five thousand pounds. Going, going, gone! Now, for goodness sake, Jer—Mr. Samuels, don't look so aghast. The price is an absolutely fair one."

"I don't believe it!" he repeated. "At least—I mean, I don't believe they'll do it."

"Don't you know that people will do anything for money?" she said, with a sudden seriousness.

He winced, and then drew himself up with a dignity which made him seem taller and slighter.

"I know; that was always your idea," he said. "You believe that you can buy everything and everybody, and that everybody wants to be bought. In the old days you thought that I was just one of those who hung about you because of your infer—eh—wealth. I wasn't. I've proved since that if I want money I can make it."

"And lose it," she interposed.

"Exactly. In any case, you were wrong then, and you are wrong to-day."

"Prove it!"

"Time will prove it. I'm willing to wager."

"What have you got to wager—your salary?"

"Better than that—a secret."

"That's a misuse of feminine curios-

ity. However, it will pass. What are my stakes to be?"

"Shall we say—the permission to call on you?"

"As Mr. Samuels?"

"I *have* another suit," he said, with humility. "Anyhow, you can pretend that I'm the furniture man, if you like. I don't want to shame you before your butler."

"Thank you. Sh!"

Somewhere along the passage a door had been opened, and footsteps were heard coming in their direction.

"Come, Archibald!" said Adelaide Dechesney.

She swept past Mr. Samuels, of Greene & Greene's, auctioneers, and left him standing there, gazing up blankly at the "Old Master."

CHAPTER VII.

Number — Portman Square was in that unlovely state of confusion which attends "removals," auctions, and other unpleasantnesses—that is to say, a furniture van decorated the curb outside the house, green-aproned individuals lounged superciliously on the stairs, occasionally transferring some article from one place to another by way of breaking the monotony; pictures, sideboards, chairs, and tables littered the passages, and a spirit of desolation stared out of the curtainless windows.

There was only one place in Number — Portman Square which Messrs. Greene & Greene and the furniture-van emissaries had spared—possibly out of respect; the servants' hall, under the command of the butler, retained its usual aspect of severe comfort, to which was added a touch of genteel idleness. Obviously work belonged to the past.

Only one person was ever busy, and that was Tilda, the scullery maid, an untidy, scrubby, small person, who was generally supposed to undertake any odd job beneath the dignity of the select—and these odd jobs were remarkable for their number.

On this particular afternoon, Tilda was engaged in mending the housemaid's apron, and, as this might be

called a peculiarly "odd" job, she had been allowed to sit with her superiors, and enjoy the luxury of their conversation. It happened that the footman had broken his usual reserved silence, and, as may be supposed, the cause was one of first-rate importance and interest. He was not a man to waste his breath.

"I simply can't believe it!" the cook said, with her hands in her apron. "A nice little boy like that, too!"

Tilda pricked up her ears. It is to be regretfully admitted that she did not very often listen to what was going on about her, being slow of wit—a "natural," as the housemaid told her on various occasions—but the mention of "the nice little boy" made her look up. She had large, round eyes, and a mouth with a tendency to gape—characteristics which were very marked at this particular moment.

"It's as true as the Gospel," said the footman emphatically. "I tell you, I heard it with my own ears. Five thousand a year—that's what they get, and Mrs. Dechesney she gets the boy. A nice bargain, I must say, and——"

He was interrupted by a low, but piercing, wail from the scullery maid. She had dropped the apron, heedless of Susan's indignation, and large tears of horror and grief stood in the pale eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Adams, don't you go and say for they've gone and give away Master Archibald!" she sobbed. "It'll break 'is little 'eart, it will, I knows it will!"

Then a peal at the front door sent Tilda sniffing and shuffling up the stairs. Fortunately, the visitor was not a person of any importance. As Mr. Samuels, of Greene & Greene, loomed up before her dulled vision, Tilda drew a sigh of relief. She had a liking for Mr. Samuels, who neither snubbed nor bullied her, and she accredited him with what she called "a good 'eart," so that a faint, watery smile struggled with the lugubrious tears which trickled down her cheeks.

"I've just come in to speak with Mr. St. John about the china," the auctioneer's man said, as he hung up his hat on the stand. "Now, then, my dear,

what's the matter with you? 'Pon my word, I believe the girl is crying her pretty eyes out!"

But even this subtle flattery failed, and Tilda, on whose disposition "a good 'eart" always had a softening effect, burst out into a long-suppressed snort of despair and grief.

The sound roused Baby Archibald from profound slumbers behind a packing case. He had been playing hide and seek with himself and the various boxes and odd pieces of furniture which littered the hall, and in the natural course of events had fallen asleep. He sat up now and rubbed his eyes. From his point of advantage he could see and not be seen, but for the first moment he was too drowsy to notice anything. Then the scullery maid and the auctioneer's man heard a strange sound—something which sounded not unlike "Goblin!"

"'Tain't nothing!" said Tilda, drying her eyes with the corner of her apron. "It's that there furniture things which is allus creaking to itself."

"Well, and even if it does, that doesn't explain what you're crying about."

Tilda sniffed.

"It's Master Archibald," she said gaspingly, "the sweetest little boy that was ever borned——"

"But that's nothing to cry about, either."

The sniff developed to a second snort.

"They're goin' to sell him!" Tilda burst out in a flood of unusual coherency. "It's a real, downright sell—five thousand pounds a year—for the sweetest little boy that was ever borned—to that stiff-necked Mrs. Dechesney, which looks as though she 'ad swallowed a poker for her breakfast every day these ten years. And me that fond of 'im, too. 'E's the only Christian in the 'ouse, 'e is."

Mr. Samuels leaned his portly frame against the wall.

"You mean," he began slowly and emphatically, as though recovering from an unbelievable shock, "you mean that they are going to give him to *that* woman?"

"That woman?" echoed Tilda. "Wot d'yer mean?"

Mr. Samuels scratched his head dubiously and mysteriously.

"I'm not saying anything," he said, "but Mr. St. John ought to know what he is doing. It isn't safe to give a young child like that into the hands of a woman who does not know anything about such little creatures. I've heard tales"—he twisted his mouth horribly—"that would make your blood turn cold. One woman I knew—very nice lady, by the way—adopted a little boy just like that, and she gave him rhubarb pills every morning for breakfast, and codliver oil for lunch, and licorice for supper, and at the end of a year that little boy *died!*"

Tilda had stopped crying. Her eyes were wide open with horror.

"Lor'!" she said.

Mr. Samuels nodded.

"Died!" he reiterated. "Died like a doornail. Somebody ought to tell Mr. St. John."

"'Tain't no good. Mr. St. John never bothers about Master Archibald."

"Well, Mrs. St. John, then!"

"She!" Tilda's tone was one of condensed scorn and bitterness. "She don't think of nothing but 'er clothes and 'er jools. She don't care wot becomes of 'im. And, besides, it's as much as my place's worth—though that ain't saying much."

"Somebody ought to do something," Mr. Samuels answered firmly. "A nice little boy like that!"

"The nice little boy" heard no more. With a caution and dexterity learned in many a bloodcurdling bear hunt, he crawled out from behind the packing case, and up the stairs, which led to his mother's boudoir. The whole business was a wonderful feat of self-control, for the tears were rolling pell-mell down his cheeks, and when he cried he usually cried audibly. But when he reached the corridor, he forgot all caution, and took to his heels, and fled in a kind of piteous, childish panic.

It was the patter-patter of his small feet which startled Mrs. St. John from

her task of writing letters. She looked up with a slight frown on her pretty brows, and saw her small son standing in the doorway—his face tear-stained, his lips quivering. A sudden color rushed to her cheeks.

"Well, baby?" she said, with a strange, unusual tenderness.

The sound broke the momentary paralysis which his awe had imposed upon him. He flung himself into her arms in a passion of grief and fear.

"Oh, mother, mother, it isn't true—it isn't true what the goblin said?"

She held him close to her, moved by an emotion so new to her that she did not in the first moment recognize it for what it was.

"Baby, what goblin? I don't understand."

He looked at her with wide-open, remorse-filled eyes.

"I didn't say 'goblin,' did I? I didn't mean to—please, you didn't hear, did you?"

Entirely puzzled, but obeying the behests of a belated instinct, Mrs. St. John shook her head.

"No, if you don't want me to, I didn't. But what is the matter? Why were you crying?"

Instantly he remembered his personal sorrow, and the small face began to pucker miserably.

"Tilda—Tilda said that you were going to sell me," he sobbed, "and that you didn't care for anything but—but jools—and that you wouldn't care if I died of—codliver oil—and—lickous and——"

The last part of the heartbreaking recital was lost on Mrs. St. John; the first part had stung too sharply. She held Baby Archibald closer to her, closer to her than she had ever held him in her life, and the warmth of his small, shaking body seemed to penetrate to her heart, and melt something there which had been vaguely hurting—a kind of frozen weight.

"It isn't true, is it, mummy—it isn't true?" he pleaded, panic-struck by her silence.

She looked down at him, seeking time.

"Would you mind—if you went away from me—for a long time?" she said confusedly.

"I think"—he had grown suddenly quiet and grave, like a little old man—"I think—it would hurt here—terrible." And he rubbed himself meditatively in the region which has been gracefully described as the "lower chest."

Mrs. St. John did not laugh. She sat there gazing at him, with doubt and wonder in her eyes.

"Would you really care, baby?" she asked.

He made no answer, but cuddled up closer to her, with his head under her arm, and for a moment neither spoke. Then he wriggled himself free, and looked up at her again.

"It isn't true, mummy, is it?" he reiterated piteously.

She shook her head.

"Hush! You must be very quiet for a minute. I want to think. Stay there, baby."

She pushed the letters on one side, and, with her hand supporting her chin, stared blankly out of the window. The other hand held Baby Archibald's. He had curled up obediently at her feet, and presently the smothered sobs died away into short-drawn sighs of exhaustion.

Mrs. St. John listened. And as she listened, a gradual change came over her face. Wonder, doubt, and a dawning understanding gave way at last to a look of desperate resolution, and the next instant she had rung the electric bell on her table.

It happened that it was Tilda who answered the summons. She was passing the door at that particular moment, and, knowing that in these degenerate days the bell probably meant an "odd job," she put in her scarlet, unhappy face. Then, as she saw Mrs. St. John, and the queer-shaped little bundle at her feet, her mouth and eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Lor'!" she said, under her breath.

Mrs. St. John looked up, and an expression of relief passed over her face.

"Go and get Master Archibald's trunk down from the attic," she ordered

briefly. "And put out all the things he will need for a journey. Do you understand?"

"Y-e-s, mum."

"And send Susan to me."

"Y-es."

"And if you are asked any questions by anybody, you are not to answer them. Do you understand?"

"Y-es—mum."

"That will do. You can go."

Tilda gasped and went. Mrs. St. John pushed the letters into the wastepaper basket, and began to write in feverish haste. Baby Archibald slumbered peacefully.

CHAPTER VIII.

On her way downstairs, Tilda encountered the footman. He held a letter in his hand, which he was considering on all sides with supercilious interest.

"From Mrs. Dechesney for the master," he said, "and there's a man waiting for an answer. Here, as you're going upstairs, you'd better take it along up."

Obviously Mr. Adams suffered from optical illness, otherwise he would have seen that Tilda's destination was the kitchen, but she was not in a state of mind to argue the point with him, and she turned and plodded back the way she had come.

She found her master in his sitting room, apparently reading the newspaper, but as he was holding it upside down it could scarcely have been of absorbing interest. He started up as she entered. Not even the monocle could disguise the fact that his attire was unusually negligent, and that he looked tired and harassed.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"A letter for you, sir. A man is waiting for the answer."

Standing first on one leg, and then on another, Tilda waited while Mr. St. John ran over the contents of the message. Her mouth opened and shut at regular intervals, but no sound came forth, and only when he crushed the paper together and threw it into the

fire did she give vent to her habitual gasp.

"Go down and tell your mistress that Mrs. Dechesney is coming for Master Archibald this evening," he said. "I—I should like to speak with her at once."

Tilda did not move. Her mouth was now open, and apparently fixed. Her eyes gaped a ludicrous mixture of fear and determination.

"Be quick!" Heathcote St. John exclaimed emphatically. "Why, what's the matter with the girl?" For Tilda's features were undergoing the most hideous contortions, and at last, as though overcoming some terrific obstacle, a flood of outrageous English burst from her shaking lips.

"Please, master, don't you go for to do it—don't yer—though it's much as my place's worth—don't you go for to do it—it'll break 'is little 'eart, it will, and she'll kill him on rhu—u—barb and cod—cod——"

"She's mad!" St. John burst in, with his hand on the bell. "Matilda, calm yourself, for mercy's sake, and tell me what's wrong with you."

"'Tain't me," said Tilda, mopping her eyes with the corner of her apron. "It's Master Archibald wot I'm worriting about. I know it'll break 'is 'eart—I know it."

And this time St. John grasped her meaning. He coughed, frowned, and readjusted his eyeglass.

"Matilda, you are a very silly girl, and a very interfering one," he said. "You should learn not to mix yourself in other people's affairs. I—eh—am compelled to travel, and during that time—eh—Mrs. Dechesney—will take care of Master Archibald. There is no need for this commotion, no need at all. It's all for his good."

In his uneasiness he had grown pompous, and his pomposity seemed to goad the daring Tilda to frenzy.

"All for 'is good, indeed! What do you think 'e cares for money and fine clothes if 'e ain't got 'is own father and mother—'im wot loves you so!" she snorted. "You'd sell 'im—yes, sell your flesh and blood for dirty money. You air't fit to 'ave a little hangel like that.

If I was you, I'd work my fingers to the bone 'fore I'd play 'im such a low, mean trick—I'd——"

"You can go!" said St. John, furiously calm.

"I'm a-goin', thank you!" retorted the enraged Tilda. "This 'ere is a free country, and I've said my say. I'm poor, but I'm honest, and I'm glad to shake the dust of this 'ere 'ouse off my feet, I am!"

She suited the action to the word, and St. John was left staring blankly at the door, red in the face, but not now with anger. He had been compelled to face things as they really were, not as he had chosen to see them, and the effect was instantaneous—the more so because his silenced conscience rose up to add its testimony against him. What, as the scullery maid had said, did money and luxury matter to a baby, who preferred a rag dog and imaginary bears to the grandest toys? It was all a poor excuse to save themselves, to keep themselves from trouble and poverty. They were cowards, hiding behind a child!

But his wife? She would never consent—never let go her hold on the rescuing hand which had been held out to her. She would never be able to bear the struggle—she was not made to fight—or to love.

And then he was conscious of a strange, mingled feeling of tenderness and bitterness. She was so fair and young, so lovable; but she had never learned to love, perhaps could never learn. And if he asked such a sacrifice of her, would she ever forgive him?

He shook his head as if answering his own question, and in the same moment the door opened again, and Mrs. Dechesney stood on the threshold. She was looking unusually elegant and determined; unusually stiff, too, and uncompromising. St. John straightened his shoulders.

"I've come," she said abruptly. "Where's Archibald?"

"I don't know," said St. John, equally abrupt. Unconsciously he was beginning to look upon her as a sort of witch in modern garb, and his manner was not cordial.

"I came for him a day earlier than I intended," Mrs. Dechesney said, seating herself. "I did not suppose you would mind; on the contrary, you will be glad to have him off your hands."

St. John winced.

"Eh—yes," he said, "that is——" He lifted his head, and faced her with a new expression on his face. "I am not in the least glad," he said slowly and distinctly, "the more I think of it, the less I like it. After all, he is our own son—*our* son, and we have not the right to sell him. I tell you, if it was not for my wife——"

"You would refuse to part with him," Mrs. Dechesney finished ironically. "How convenient it is to have a wife!"

St. John said nothing for a moment, and the two looked at each other in hot defiance. Then St. John adjusted his eyeglass.

"You can jeer at me as much as you like," he said. "My hands are tied by a promise to my wife; otherwise I would act differently. Archibald will be here in a minute."

He rang the bell, and Mrs. Dechesney laughed.

"Heathcote, you ought to have gone on the stage," she said good-humoredly. "As the 'heavy father' you would reduce the gallery to floods. Now, what part is Cecilia going to play, I wonder."

St. John winced again, but he was given no opportunity to retort, for the door opened, and the footman ushered in Mr. Samuels, of Greene & Greene. That gentleman was in a high state of fluster, and, if anything, he looked burlier and redder in the face than ever.

"Pray excuse this abrupt entry, Mr. St. John," he said apologetically, "but I was cataloguing some china in the drawing-room, when I had the honor of meeting Mrs. St. John. She was just going out, and asked me to give you this letter at once, and in person."

St. John snatched the envelope from the unusual messenger, who, meanwhile, gave Mrs. Dechesney the benefit of a profound bow. Mrs. Dechesney ignored the civility. Her keen eyes were fixed on St. John's face, and saw there the strangest change from amazement

to the wildest relief. The next instant he had thrust the letter in her hands.

"Read that," he said. "She's gone—with Baby Archibald, to her mother! She couldn't part with him, after all—not for all the wealth in Europe—not even for my sake; and she's bolted with him. There, listen!" He rushed to the window. "The four-wheeler has just driven off. By Jove, she's a woman, after all!"

"Then the five thousand pounds is off," said Mrs. Dechesney hotly.

"And I don't care a hang!" was the rude answer. "I don't care a hang! I'm infernally glad—I——"

"Heathcote, don't use worse language than you can help." Mrs. Dechesney rose with dignity. "And if your wife gets tired of milking cows, my offer still holds good. Good-by."

St. John was still staring rapturously out of the window, and did not even answer. Mr. Samuels, of Greene & Greene, opened the door wide.

"I've just got my frock coat out of pawn," he whispered, as Mrs. Dechesney sailed past him. "I'll be round tomorrow afternoon."

But Mrs. Dechesney deigned no answer.

CHAPTER IX.

Heathcote St. John had arrayed himself in his best morning suit, and had been unusually fastidious as to the set of his collar and the color of his tie—facts which might have pointed to a festive occasion had they not been belied by the mingled depression and resolution expressed on his countenance.

As a matter of fact, he was preparing himself to "face the music" as he would have put it, and obeying by instinct the natural law by which it is ordained that a man in a well-cut coat is more likely to brazen matters out with success than a similarly situated individual in a shabby garment, he had given his morning toilet a careful if unaided attention. Charles, his French valet, had gone.

As he leisurely descended to the dining room, his eye rested disconsolately on the bare walls and carpetless floors,

and when he entered the once luxurious room, he found nothing but a table and a few chairs—and no breakfast.

He went to the fireplace, and rang the bell with the diffident air of a man who does not expect to be answered, and Tilda, who eventually answered the fourth summons, was greeted with a patience wholly different from the reception she had promised herself.

In truth, her tardy arrival was due to the fact that she had stood for five minutes outside the door, shaking in every limb. Her daring performance a few days back had magnified itself in her easily heated imagination to a heinous offense, and it was only the memory of Susan's comforting assurance, "Well, he can't eat you, anyway," which at length brought her over the threshold.

"Yes, sir?" she said timidly.

Heathcote turned from his moody contemplation of the empty fire grate, and adjusted his eyeglass.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "You seem to be running the house just now. The others are taking a rest cure, I presume? Well, never mind. Try and persuade cook to give me a cup of tea, will you?"

Tilda stood uncertainly on one leg, and then on the other. She was getting off lightly—apparently her sins were either forgotten or forgiven—but she was convinced that her next remark would call forth the dreaded storm.

"If you please, sir, cook isn't hup yet," she said, with a small gasp, and then waited with chattering teeth for what was to come.

Heathcote merely gave vent to a grim chuckle.

"Of course she isn't—how thoughtless of me! On no account disturb her. All the same, I am dying of thirst. What's to be done, eh?"

He looked at her with such an expression of woebegone appeal that Tilda's hopelessly inane gape gradually passed into a look of dawning intelligence. Her terror of her usually distant and unapproachable master was dying a natural death, and her mother wit consequently revived.

"If you please, sir, I could make hup

the fire and bile the kettle in a jiffy. I knows 'ow to make a cup o' tea with the best of 'em," she said.

Heathcote smiled.

"That's right. Fire away, then. You're a magnificent woman—a regular *Deus ex machina*, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Tilda obediently, and wondered if the new sobriquet had anything in common with the epithets usually showered upon her by her natural enemy, the cook. But apparently no harm was meant, and she busied herself with her preparations, appearing presently with a kitchen breakfast service and some rather greasy-looking toast.

During her absence St. John had seated himself at the table, and drawn out a crumpled letter from his breast pocket. He was reading it as she entered, and was so absorbed that he forgot to thank her, and his thirst for tea seemed to have entirely disappeared. For about the twentieth time he was reading the hastily scribbled letter which Mr. Samuels had brought him on the memorable day when his wife and Baby Archibald had taken to flight. It was a very disjointed, illogical little epistle, but it seemed to give the reader a peculiar satisfaction.

Mrs. St. John had written:

I am very sorry, Heathcote. I know I am sel'sh, but I can't help it. I meant to go through with it for my own sake as well as for yours. I wanted the nice things of life just as much as you did, but somehow I can't pay the price. It's absurd, but I can't do without Baby Archibald, and I don't believe he can do without me. I have just found it all out, and I haven't the courage to tell you. So I am going home, and I hope you will forgive me. I don't expect you to understand. I hardly understand myself, and you, being only a man, will only see that I have thrown away everything I used to care about. I don't know what is going to happen to us all, but I know that I can't give up my baby for all the wealth in the world.

"Only a man, indeed!" Heathcote St. John muttered indignantly, as he refolded the letter, but there was a curiously light-hearted twinkle in his eye as he looked up and perceived Tilda standing, with arms akimbo, her cap over one ear, watching him.

"Why, hullo!" he exclaimed cheerily. "What's the matter now, my kindly administering sprite?"

The administering sprite wriggled nervously.

"If you please, your tea, sir!"

"Oh, yes, the tea; confound it! I had quite forgotten. H'm, excellent stuff. When I move to Park Lane you shall be head cook. I swear it by my ancestors, if I have any worth swearing by. Now, finish your good offices, and fetch up such of my retainers as by this time have left their slumbers. I have a word to say to them."

Tilda gave another of her characteristic gasps. The flow of words left her completely out of breath, but she had gathered enough to understand her mission, and went shuffling out of the room and downstairs. When she had gone, Heathcote crossed over to his writing desk, unlocked a drawer, and took out sundry little packages, which he laid out in order.

The various servants were soon paid off and dismissed. This done, St. John threw himself into a chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

"If you please, sir," said a small voice, very timidly, at his elbow.

He opened his eyes and started round. Tilda, twisting her envelope between her work-worn fingers, was gazing up at him with an expression of frightened resolution. Her ludicrous appearance was not modified by the fact that her round eyes were swimming in tears, but she was very much in earnest, and Heathcote was not in the mood to laugh at her.

"Well?" he said. "What's the matter? Isn't the amount right?"

"Oh, yes, thank you. If you please, sir, I don't want it."

"Eh?"

"I don't want it."

"Don't want what?"

"The money, sir."

Heathcote shook his head.

"Tilda, I should consult a doctor at once. A person who doesn't want money must be mentally deranged."

"Please, sir, wot's that?"

"Wrong in the head."

"Oh, yes, I knows. Cook tells me that twenty times a day, so I s'ppose it's true, but I knows wot I'm a-talkin' about now. If you ain't got nothink for yourself, sir, I don't want nothink, neither. That's flat."

"Oh, that's flat, is it?" A faint smile was dawning over Heathcote's face. "I see how it is, Tilda. You're a philanthropist, which is about the same thing as being wrong in the head—especially if you are poor. You're not a millionaire in disguise, are you, Tilda?"

"Me, sir? Lor', no! Father's a cab owner. There ain't no millions to be 'ad in that there line with them taxis, sir."

"H'm!" Heathcote seated himself, and waved her to the only other chair of which the room boasted. "Sit down, Tilda! Yes, I mean it—sit down. I'm feeling rather lonely, and it appears that you are the only friend that I have got left. All my other friends are out of town. Do you know what it means when one's friends are out of town in the season, Tilda?"

"No, sir."

"You're lucky. I've just found out. Now, sit down properly. Don't balance on the edge of your chair like that—it can't be comfortable."

"'Tain't right, sir."

"Oh, yes, it is, Tilda. We're both in the same box now. Wasn't it you who told me the other day that you were poor but honest? Well, that's my state now, only I'm not sure about being honest. At any rate, in spite of all your very excellent advice, I was ready to let my son go for the sake of the money bags, while my wife did the only right thing there was to be done, and took him out of danger. Which proves that she's worth half a dozen of me, doesn't it?"

Tilda put her disorderly-looking head on one side.

"Don't know, sir. We women is different. 'Tain't likely a man should understand."

"Oh, look here—hang it all, Tilda, don't you start rubbing it in! I know I'm a mere man, but I suppose you will allow that it is possible for me to have

some feelings? But, being a very ignorant and helpless member of the male species, I cannot do better than seek your advice. Now, just try and imagine that I'm like any poor fellow you might chance to meet on the street, without a friend or a penny piece to bless himself with, and with a wife and child that can do very well without him. Have you got that far?"

"Do you mean a feller wot I knows?"

"Yes, a friend, if you like."

Tilda reflected a moment.

"First I'd take 'im 'ome," she said slowly, "and mother 'u'd give 'im a square meal and a shake-down in our spare room. Then we'd look out for a job for 'im."

"But suppose he wasn't good for anything—had never done a stroke of work in his life?"

"Can't you do nothink, sir?" Tilda demanded, with eyes wide with surprise.

St. John thought a moment.

"I can play polo first class, and am a fair hand at bridge. I can drive a coach as well as any man in England, and make a mess of my affairs generally. Not a very promising list of accomplishments for a man looking for a job, is it?"

"If you could drive a coach you could drive a cab, sir," Tilda said, with a flash of inspiration.

St. John looked at her, and then burst out laughing.

"'Pon my word, so I could!" he said. "Perhaps we shall come to that yet. There! I heard the postman's knock. I'll run down and see if there are any letters. You stay there, Tilda, till I come back."

Tilda gazed after him, open-mouthed, as he ran lightly down the broad, carpetless staircase. There was something fresh and almost boyish about him, which was quite new to her—and, indeed, to Heathcote himself. Though despair and a curious, aching loneliness gnawed away at a newly discovered region of his being, he felt freer and younger. Positively his heart beat faster as he fumbled with the refractory letter box. Three letters fell out, and

one he seized upon with a hungry eagerness, and, tearing it open, began to read it then and there by the dim light which filtered through the hall window. The letter was from his wife. Like the note, it was jerky and abrupt—and several degrees colder:

DEAR HEATHCOTE: I do not know whether it will interest you very much, but I thought I ought to let you know that baby and I have arrived home safely. As I have not heard from you I suppose that you are very angry. I am not going to make excuses for myself again. I do not in the least regret what I have done, and I am very happy to be here. But I am sorry for you. I suppose it was mean of me to leave you to face things out alone. I think everything has been a mistake from the beginning. We began at the wrong end of things. Neither of us had ever faced anything serious in our lives, and now we can't help either ourselves or each other. Only I have the baby, and I shall never give him up. I hope there is no law to make me, because I shan't. Father and mother say you can stay here until you have made some plans for yourself. Perhaps you could get some position where there is not much work to do—it must be dreadful for you. Please let me know what you arrange.

Your wife,
CECILIA.

And then, at the very bottom of the letter, in large and most unsteady letters, he found a postscript:

I am very wel. I hop you are very wel.
I wish you were here. Do kum soon.
Your luvving
ARCHIBALD.

There followed a large, watery-looking blotch, which for more experienced eyes would have had a pathetic significance. But Heathcote was too stung to see clearly. The cold little letter, with its undercurrent of mockery and disparagement, had cut him to the quick—perhaps because he knew that it was justified. She treated him as a helpless drone, and something she had once said to him reoccurred to him now, lighted this time by a ray of understanding:

"If it were *your* money there would not be all this trouble; and besides, *then* I should not have married you for it."

At the time he had regarded the remark as one of his wife's unsolvable paradoxes; now he understood. If he had worked like other men—had built

a home for her with his own hands—she might have loved and respected him. Certain he was that she would not have left him now in the hour of his bitterest need.

With compressed lips, he turned his attention to the other two letters. Both were from friends, wealthy business men whom he had welcomed constantly at his house. Both were extremely sorry, but they knew of nothing to suit him. If they heard of anything they would let him know at once. Had he thought of trying the colonies, *et cetera*?

He crushed the letters together in his hand, and threw them into a far corner of the empty hall.

With a firm step, he went back to the dining room, where Tilda, from sheer force of habit, was flicking the dust from one place to another. She turned eagerly as he entered.

"Tilda," he said cheerily, "I've got just twenty shillings in the world. Do you think that you would keep me for a week in that shake-down you were telling me about?"

"Oh, sir!"

"Don't gasp like that. And look here, I've been thinking it over, and that idea about driving a cab isn't bad, Tilda. In fact, it's a perfect inspiration. How do you think I'd look perched up on the box with my best topper on, and a sporting coat of the latest cut? Don't you think I'd take the shine out of one of those taxi villains?"

Tilda's eyes were now stretched to a degree that was positively alarming.

"If you please, sir—I didn't mean—you're a fine gent, sir——"

"Am I really? Are you quite sure, Tilda? Do you know, I'm not, and I'm rather anxious to find out. And please don't call me 'sir' any more. You're going to take me home, away from this abomination of desolation, and give me a square meal and a job. Do you hear? And we're going to be friends, and give the taxis fits, aren't we, Tilda? Shake!"

He held out his hand. Tilda wiped hers on her apron, and they "shook" solemnly.

CHAPTER X.

Mrs. Dechesney sat by her tea table, staring blankly over the teacups at her visitor, whose teacup was empty, and had been empty for some time.

Mrs. Dechesney made no offer to refill it, and Mrs. Smythe made not the slightest sign of taking her departure. She was much too absorbed in the outpouring of her information, and in her endeavor to obtain like in return to notice her hostess' frigidity of manner—even supposing that she was given to noticing such things, which she was not.

"Perhaps you ought to know. In fact, dear Adelaide, I feel it my duty to tell you. Some one actually told me that you were going to adopt the St. Johns' little boy, with five thousand pounds a year as a *douceur* for the St. Johns. Quite absurd, wasn't it?"

"Quite," said Mrs. Dechesney, with grimly compressed lips.

"That's what I said!" Mrs. Smythe agreed enthusiastically. "Only, of course, Mrs. St. John is *so* fond of life, isn't she? And one could have imagined that the idea might have tempted her. After all, such a good thing for the boy, too. But, of course, it seemed ridiculous that you, of all people, should want a child about the house."

She waited hesitatingly for her hostess to say something.

"Do I look the sort of person to go round adopting other people's children?" Mrs. Dechesney demanded.

Mrs. Smythe blinked at the handsome, uncompromising features.

"Of course not," she said soothingly. "I hope you are not angry that I mentioned it, dear Adelaide. Only I felt that I should like to have your authority to contradict such a silly rumor."

"Please don't bother," "dear Adelaide" murmured.

"I feel it my duty. Though of course the whole idea is exploded, now that Mrs. St. John has returned to her mother, and her husband has disappeared. It's quite a dreadful business, isn't it? If only one knew what had become of Mr. St. John, one's mind would be easier, wouldn't it?"

"It might, and it might not," said Mrs. Dechesney enigmatically.

Her visitor's eyes opened to their widest extent.

"You don't mean—you don't think—anything dreadful? Oh, dear Adelaide, do tell me!"

"I haven't anything to tell you. I don't know what other people's minds are likely to do, do I?"

Mrs. Smythe rose, and shook out her silk skirts like an injured peacock. Inwardly she was telling herself that "dear Adelaide" was really getting very trying.

"And to think it is all the fault of that uncle!" she said, preparing herself for an orderly retreat. "You know, I always had my doubts about Jeremy Harris—a terrible *vaurien*. I remember at the time he proposed to me——"

"Oh, he proposed to you?"

Mrs. Smythe bridled and simpered, not without malice.

"Didn't you know? Oh, dear me, yes—long ago, of course. His attentions were most marked. I was quite sorry about it, although I gave him no encouragement. After all, I couldn't, could I? His father was a coal merchant or something, and then he is so very plain——"

The butler threw open the door.

"Mr. Samuels!" he announced, and the next minute a broad-shouldered, somewhat thickset figure made its appearance on the threshold.

Mrs. Smythe suppressed a gasp, and then drew herself frigidly upright. Mrs. Dechesney rose, and held out her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Samuels," she said. "Mrs. Smythe, may I introduce you? An old friend—you remember each other, no doubt?"

Mrs. Smythe stared icily through the newcomer's bullet head.

"I think we have met before," she admitted, "only in those days Mr. Samuels was Mr.— But perhaps I am being indiscreet. Good-by, dear Adelaide!"

She did not actually draw her skirts aside as she sailed past, but her manner suggested that there was a case of measles in the room, and that she was

trying to escape infection. When the door closed upon her the remaining two looked at each other, and a slow grimace wrinkled up Mr. Samuels' round features.

"She didn't seem to like me as much as she used to," he said. "What do you think was wrong? Was it my clothes, or my face—or both?"

"Both, I should think," Mrs. Dechesney said, eying him with strong disapproval. "Is that—that suit *new*?"

"New?" Mr. Samuels inspected himself thoughtfully. "Well, 'new' is rather a relative term, isn't it? They're new for me, you know. I bought them yesterday—secondhand."

Mrs. Dechesney sat down.

"How dreadful!" she said.

"Yes, isn't it?" He sighed. "But beggars can't be choosers, you know. I hope you don't mind. It was rather bad luck—my running into that old ferret. I'm afraid she'll compromise you forever."

"I dare say. But I hardly think it nice of you to call the object of one of your passionate attachments an 'old ferret.'"

"Passionate attachment? Really, Adelaide——"

"My name is not Adelaide—at least, not for you, Mr. Samuels. At any rate, 'the old ferret' has just been giving me a graphic description of one of your proposals to her."

"One of my—— Well, upon my word!" Mr. Samuels laughed gayly, and began to pour himself out a cup of tea. "I expect she was trying to make you jealous," he suggested.

"Jealous! Jeremy!"

"Mr. Samuels!" he corrected.

"You are as intolerable as ever," she said, sitting back in her chair. Nevertheless, a wintry smile had dawned across her features.

"You see, the old thing has an imagination," he went on placidly. "As far as I can remember, I never got as far as one proposal, but I paid her a lot of attention—for the same purpose."

"What purpose?"

"Of making you jealous."

Mrs. Dechesney moved impatiently.

"You were and are ridiculous," she said.

"Yes, I realize that now. A ruse like that wasn't likely to have the slightest effect on a woman so cased up in her own convictions as you were. You knew I was the son of a small merchant, and you knew I was after your money, and so, of course, I hadn't a chance." He seated himself opposite, balancing his plate of bread and butter awkwardly on one knee. "It doesn't matter our talking about this sort of things now; they are all over and done with, and we can afford to talk them over calmly."

"Yes," she agreed, but without much enthusiasm.

"For instance," he went on, "I always wanted to know how you found me out. I mean, how you knew that it was the money that tempted me. It was uncommonly smart—for a woman."

Her mouth set again in its old hard lines.

"Everybody is after money," she said coldly. "I guessed it from the beginning, and afterward I knew for certain."

"But your husband——"

She got up suddenly, and went away from him to the window, where she stood with her back turned. Mr. Samuels looked after her, and then put his cup softly on the table. A change had come over his round, weather-beaten face. It softened, and with that sudden expression of tenderness the plainness of his features seemed to vanish.

"I'm sorry, Adelaide," he said quietly. "It's rather mean of me to take advantage of your permission to call on you, and then worry you with the whys and wherefores of things. After all, we must all judge by our own experiences, and you may be right. Perhaps I ought not to have come; but I couldn't resist, and, after all, I won my bet, didn't I?"

She turned again, and looked at him with knitted brows.

"You mean about the St. Johns?" she asked.

"Yes. It seems that five thousand pounds wasn't quite high enough, after all."

She gave a little contemptuous laugh. "I'll give six thousand pounds, if needs must," she said. "I want that child. It's an absurd fancy, but I want something which for a few years, at least, will cling to me without knowing why, without regard for the financial reasons for its affection. Of course, I know that afterward would come ingratitude and disappointment; but I am an old woman, and——"

"Old?" he interrupted.

For the first time she saw the change in his face, and to hide the rising tide of color she passed her hand over her forehead to the gray hair.

"Yes, old," she repeated. "It's no good, Jeremy, you can't flatter me. Besides, it isn't flattery. I don't want to be young again."

"Nor I," he said, under his breath.

There was a moment's silence. They were looking at each other, taking toll of each other's sorrows, and of the traces which years and grief had left behind them. Then Mr. Samuels rose, and came to her side.

"I hate you to be disappointed, Adelaide," he said, "but you'll never get Baby Archibald."

"You think not? You really believe that that little gust of maternal affection will stand poverty and petty trial? Look! Here is a letter from Mrs. St. John herself. I got it this morning. She says she is worrying about her husband, and reproaches herself, but feels that she has done the right thing, et cetera. In other words, she is waiting for another offer. As to Heathcote, I have not the least doubt that when he has smoked his last half-crown cigar, and had his first taste at trying to earn his own living, he will be round here with the same doubts and qualms of conscience."

Mr. Samuels took the proffered letter, and read it carefully. There was a little smile about the corner of his mouth, as he handed it back to her.

"Yes, she does not seem to be exactly happy," he agreed. "I suppose milking cows under the paternal eye is not the most exhilarating of occupations, though I know worse. But are you

quite sure you have read the letter aright?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like to say—I hardly know myself. But I'm quite willing to enter on another wager with you."

She laughed shortly.

"You are an incorrigible gambler," she said. "What is it now?"

"I wager my secret plus a correct foretelling of the immediate future as regards a certain important event against your frank admission that you are mistaken about humanity in general, and the St. Johns in particular. You believe that money is everything to them, and to everybody. It isn't. *They* thought so, too, but they are beginning to find out the truth, as you will one day—that money, after all, is nothing against——"

"Jeremy, don't talk platitudes to me!"

"I won't, Adelaide; I'll prove them to you."

"When?"

"I'll begin right away, if you'll tell me one thing."

"And what is that?"

"That you'd be a little glad to find out that you had been in the wrong, that you had been rather hard on the rest of us poor mortals."

"Why should I be glad?" she demanded, almost defiantly.

He looked her full in the eyes. And in that moment he seemed to grow taller. There were even a certain dignity and power in his bearing as he answered her:

"I can't tell you why—I only want to hear from you that you *would* be glad."

There was a moment's silence. She tried valiantly to retain her hard, unmoved expression, but for one instant a spasm of pain passed over her features, and she turned quickly away from him.

"Of course I should be glad," she said quietly. "My knowledge has poisoned my whole life. There have been times when I have cursed the power which gave me an insight into the hearts of those I loved."

He smiled, unperceived.

"Yes, I know that. Do you know

when I knew? It was this afternoon, when you called me an 'old friend' to that—that woman. Unconsciously you stood up for me, Adelaide. It was a little thing, but it proved to me that your heart was not dead yet. And now I am going to show you something; it is the first link in my chain." He took her by the hand, and led her to the window. "Look!" he said.

Her eyes followed his pointing finger.

"Well?" she demanded, with a touch of her old asperity. "What is there to see? A hansom cab. Whose is it?"

"Mine."

"Isn't that rather an extravagance for Greene & Greene's valuer?"

"It is—decidedly. I shall have to go without my supper in consequence, and hope you will be generous with the cake to make up for it. But I want you to notice the driver."

"What about him? He looks rather smarter than the usual run. Quite a good-looking young man. Why—good heavens—it's—it's——"

"Number thirty-five hundred and five—otherwise Mr. Heathcote St. John, late of Portman Square."

"But, Jeremy, in the name of all things, what is he doing?"

"Earning his living."

"Jeremy, it's not possible!"

"It's quite possible. I picked him up after he had driven a poor old body from Kensington to Waterloo for nothing. He's no business man, but he's in dead earnest."

"But what are we going to do? I can't leave him out there!"

"You must. He has to stay by his horse."

"Jeremy, it's positively terrible. What shall I do?"

Mr. Samuels smiled grimly.

"You'd better send him out a glass of whisky and soda," he said. "Mrs. Smythe has passed for the third time, and has just recognized him."

Mrs. Dechesney stood a moment in bewildered silence.

"And his wife?"

"Knows nothing. Is probably milking cows in Somerset, or wherever the place may be. You see, Adelaide——"

She drew herself up severely.

"You called me 'Adelaide' *again*," she said.

He looked at her, and his eyes twinkled.

"And you have been calling me 'Jeremy' the best part of the afternoon," he retorted. "And now, hadn't you better go and see about that whisky?"

CHAPTER XI.

"You see, my dear Cecilia," Mrs. Hunter said, "this comes of going against the advice of your parents. I am not one of those people who always say 'I told you so,' but you will admit that from the very beginning I warned you against Heathcote. Of course, he is a very nice young man, and all that sort of thing, but you know, my dear, a man who idles through life——"

"I don't think Heathcote did idle," her daughter put in, with a meekness that covered over a certain amount of resentment. "He belonged to quite a lot of clubs, and once he went to a political meeting, and made a speech—or listened to one, I've forgotten which."

"Political meetings, clubs, and fiddlesticks!" Mrs. Hunter ejaculated, with as much heat as her phlegmatic disposition allowed. "That is not work, my child. Now, if he had gone into an office, or had a business—yes, if he had even kept a crossing, I should have respected him."

"But you would not have let me marry him," Cecilia ventured.

Mrs. Hunter smoothed out her stiff silk dress.

"My dear, that is neither here nor there. There are a great many people whom I heartily respect, but whom I should not consider eligible as a husband. Now, to go back, I ask you, would Heathcote undertake a menial task for your sake? Of course not—you know he wouldn't."

"He hasn't had the chance yet," Cecilia objected feebly.

"The chance is there now," her mother retorted dramatically, "but he will not recognize it. I know exactly what he will do—just what all young

men of his class do. Either he will accept a sinecure post from some commiserating friend, or will borrow money, or go to the bad altogether." Mrs. Hunter's tone grew more cheerful as her hopes descended. "At any rate, the idea of maintaining his wife and child by honest labor will never occur to him," she completed, with grim satisfaction.

Mrs. St. John let her needlework fall from her hand. She was looking pale and listless—perhaps as a result of the needlework, which was of a vivid and uncompromising pattern. But there were also tears in her eyes, and as it is doubtful whether even the most artistic person can be wrought to such a state of emotion by the mere sight of pale-blue roses with purple leaves, as worked on a canvas slipper, Mrs. St. John's trouble was obviously of another kind.

"You're not just to Heathcote," she said unsteadily. "I'm sure he would do anything he could for us. It wasn't his fault that his horrid old uncle went bankrupt. And, besides, what is he to do?"

Her tone was at once aggressive and defensive. The most casual observer would have discovered that she was desperately defending a criminal of whose innocence she herself was not at all convinced.

Mrs. Hunter rose ponderously.

"My child, you are perfectly right to speak kindly of your husband," she said. "After all, he is your husband, for better or for worse. Alas, I fear it has been for the worse. If only you had listened to me! I always said that a man who polished his finger nails would never do any good in this world."

"Mother!"

"Well, my dear, has he done any good? Has he done anything for you?"

The door opened at that moment, and a prim-looking maid entered, bearing a silver platter.

"If you please, ma'am, the letters from——"

She got no farther. Mrs. St. John had crossed the room almost before the words were out of her mouth, and had snatched—no weaker word would describe the action—the two envelopes

from the tray, and borne them in triumph to the window. The first she dropped instantly.

"For you, mother!"

"Well, my dear, you might at least bring it here! Really, these London manners——"

She stopped short, for the very sufficient reason that there is no object in holding a lecture to deaf ears, however much one is inspired. With an expression of offended dignity on her round, florid face, she composed herself to wait, at the same time keeping a stern eye on her daughter, who by now had reached the second page of her letter. But Mrs. Hunter was not fond of waiting, and the faint flush on the younger woman's face aroused her suspicions to an extent which made her forget that she was at that moment acting the part of the injured parent.

"Well, my dear?" she said, stiffly interrogative.

Mrs. St. John turned over the third page. Apparently she had not heard.

"Well, Cecilia?"

This time there was considerable asperity in the high-pitched voice. Mrs. St. John smiled to herself. It was a peculiarly sweet smile, which, taken together with the heightened color, was altogether charming; but as neither had anything to do with her mother the latter refused to be charmed.

"Cecilia!"

Cecilia looked up at last. Her eyes were sparkling, and the old look of listlessness had entirely vanished.

"Just think," she exclaimed. "Heathcote has written to me, and he is very glad I wouldn't give up Archibald, and he's got a good position in some firm, and he's doing splendidly. There now!"

It must be regretfully admitted that her manner was neither very filial nor very respectful—in fact, it was offensively triumphant, and Mrs. Hunter stiffened with displeasure.

"I am delighted to hear it," she said. "Might I inquire what firm has acquired the inestimable boon of your husband's services?"

Cecilia hesitated, and held the letter closer to the light.

"I can't quite make the name out. It looks like Jenkins & Jenkins, but I'm not sure," she said.

"And pray, who is Jenkins & Jenkins? I have never heard of the firm before."

Her daughter smiled. Her smile was gently patronizing.

"Oh, but then you wouldn't, mother. You see, you don't live in London, and so——"

"Have you ever heard of it?"

Cecilia wavered, looked at her mother, and then plunged boldly:

"Of course I have. It's a very big firm."

"What of?"

"What of? Let me see—ch—solicitors, of course."

"That accounts for you knowing them so well," Mrs. Hunter observed sarcastically. "I can imagine that Heathcote would be very useful in his new capacity—as office boy."

Mrs. St. John drew herself up to her full height. It was not a very great height, and it was wonderful what an amount of dignity she got out of it.

"Please, mother, remember you are speaking of my husband," she said. "You know perfectly well that Heathcote would never accept a subordinate position."

And with this concluding shot, she made a triumphal exit, thereby cutting short her mother's retort, which would have been finally crushing.

If necessity is the mother of invention, adversity is without doubt the mother of that and a good many other things besides, including a naughty, undisciplined spirit, with tendencies to deceit.

Baby Archibald knew this, because he himself was a living testimony to the truth of the adage. He knew that he had the above-described spirit, because Mrs. Hunter told him so regularly, and Mrs. Hunter, as enjoying the respectable position of his grandmother, could not be mistaken.

So Baby Archibald developed a naughty, undisciplined spirit, with a

tendency to deceit, and went to the bad—chiefly among the strawberry beds.

On the particular afternoon on which Mrs. Hunter and her daughter had their discussion, the former's grandson did his best to prove the theory of hereditary wickedness by performing Homeric gastronomic feats among the ripest and finest specimens. Discovery was inevitable and imminent.

Baby Archibald, feeling rather weary and depressed, heard the gardener's growling voice denouncing his misdeeds, and Mrs. Hunter's shrill retort, and he prepared himself for flight. Besides the already described spirit, adversity had endowed him with a gift for strategy. As soon as he heard David's lumbering step along the gravel path, Archibald crawled on all fours into the tool shed, and hid himself behind a mowing machine. As a rule, this place of refuge had proved entirely effectual; on this occasion, David seemed possessed of a diabolical cunning.

"Come along out o' that, Master Archibald," he growled fiercely. "I saw ye—ye thievin' little varmint!"

The heavy footsteps drew nearer, and Archibald's teeth began to chatter. If he had reasoned things out he would have known that there was nothing worse before him than a shaking and a long lecture on the evilness of his ways, but at Archibald's time of life reasoning is wholly subservient to imagination.

"Come along out o' it!" David repeated. "I sees ye!"

His shadow darkened the doorway. Baby Archibald gave a final desperate wriggle—there was a bursting, cracking sound, and a clatter of overturned cans and rakes—and, with a bump, Baby Archibald found himself sitting in the middle of a quiet lane, decidedly shaken, but saved as by a miracle.

The miracle was of a simple character. The back of the shed, which looked out onto a road, had given way, and had precipitated the refugee into an unknown region of leafy trees, and tall, graceful ferns, and lovely wild flowers, which grew up in rich profusion under their shadow. Baby Archibald, who in all his sojourn at the manor had never

been allowed to wander farther than the garden, believed himself to have been transported—rather roughly, perhaps—into fairyland. Consequently, he felt not the slightest surprise when, on scrambling to his knees, he found himself face to face with a thickset, square-jawed being, who sat on the fallen trunk of a tree, and mopped itself with a large handkerchief.

"Why, hullo, goblin!" Baby Archibald exclaimed delightedly. "Oh, I am so glad!"

Of the two, the goblin was decidedly the more surprised, but he recovered himself at once, and raised his hat.

"Why, hullo, grass orphan! Where did you spring from?"

"I didn't spring—I tumbled. Thank you very much."

"What for?"

"For bringing me here. I was so frightened."

"Oh, I brought you here, did I? H'm! Yes, of course. Well, what were you frightened of, eh?"

"David—he nearly caught me."

"He did?" The goblin stretched out a large hand, and, picking up Baby Archibald with surprising ease by the belt, planted him on the trunk beside him. "Who's David, anyhow?" he asked.

Baby Archibald raised his gray eyes in grave disappointment.

"Don't you know?"

"Of course I know, young man. I only wanted to find out if you knew."

"David's the gardener," Archibald explained, not wholly satisfied. "He's horrid—he doesn't understand little boys, mother says."

"Stupid man! And he's horrid to you, eh?"

"He doesn't like me, you see, 'cause I take the strawberries."

"H'm! 'Take' is a nice word. I presume you like strawberries?"

"Yes, and they are so good for me." His tone was slightly defensive. "Mother told granny so. I s'ppose mother knows, don't you?"

"I suppose so. Have you any doubts?"

"Sometimes I feel funny—here." He

put his hand thoughtfully to the region of his belt, and the goblin chuckled diabolically.

"Don't wonder. Never mind. It's a good thing I came in time to let you out of that trapdoor, wasn't it? By the way, it's quite a time since our first meeting. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing—'cept being un—unhappy."

"Nice occupation that, especially when varied with steal—pardon—I mean taking strawberries. Well, I haven't been having a very nice time, either. Do you know what I was doing just now?"

Baby Archibald shook his head.

"I was running away myself—from a fairy."

"You!" Baby Archibald was surprised and shocked. "What fairy?"

"I suppose I had better explain, grass orphan. You see, it was like this: Once upon a time I offended this particular fairy. She was a rather lovely person, but you know what fairies are; once you put their back up, they can never forgive you, and my fairy was the most unrelenting of the lot. You must understand that I was very fond of her, but she thought I was after her fairy castle, like all the other goblins, and wouldn't have anything to do with me. It wasn't her fault altogether. There were other fairies who made mischief, and told lies, and made things horrid. There are fairies like that, you know."

"Oh, yes!" Baby Archibald's eyes brightened. "I 'spect granny is one."

"Dear me! She doesn't tell lies, I hope?"

"About father—lots."

"And you believe them?"

"Co'rse not! Nor does mother—but she cries." He sighed heavily. "She often cries now," he added.

The goblin rubbed his hands together, and chuckled.

"That's first-rate! The charm's working."

"What charm?" Archibald demanded eagerly.

"Don't you remember? 'Pon my word, grass orphan, I believe you have forgotten!"

"'Bout father and mother and me? No, I haven't, but I 'spected you had. You were so slow."

The goblin chuckled till his cheeks grew even redder than they were.

"Slow but sure, young man. Now, come here, and I'll show you the fairy I was running away from."

With his big hand clasped round Baby Archibald's small and rather sticky one, he crept to the end of the lane, and crouched down behind a hedge, whence one could see the full length of the road, which led to the station. Presently a one-horse shay came rumbling toward them, and the goblin gave his companion a dig in the ribs.

"There she is!" he whispered.

Baby Archibald rubbed himself. It is not nice to have a dig in the ribs after you have been performing gastronomic feats among strawberry beds, but he was too excited to complain. After all, a real fairy is not to be met every day.

"Where?" he whispered.

"There—in the cart, you young fer! Don't you know a fairy when you see one?"

The shay rumbled past. Baby Archibald gave a sigh of disappointment. He had caught a glimpse of a parasol and a stern, aristocratic-looking face, and he felt that the goblin had been making fun of him.

"That wasn't a fairy!" he said. "That was Mrs. 'Chesney. *She* isn't a fairy."

"That's all you know about it. You don't suppose that fairies go about in spangles nowadays, do you? Police wouldn't let 'em. That's why I had to give up my tail, and take to these things." He indicated his attire with a disgusted finger. "But you can take my word for it that Mrs. Dechesney is a fairy right enough. She has a golden wand with which she can do everything—at least she thinks she can—and she has come down here to spoil my charm. She doesn't really want to, but she believes she does, which comes to the same thing. When you grow up, young man, you will find that fairies are the most contrary things on earth. They

don't know what they want themselves, but there's a devil of a fuss if you don't know. Anyhow, I'm here to stop this one, and to prove to her that her golden wand isn't everything. And you've got to help me, grass orphan."

"Me?" Baby Archibald's eyes were wide with excitement.

"Yes, you. You've got to take this letter to your mother at once. I had meant to give it her myself, but I didn't know the fairy was on my track, and I'm frightened. Now, run, little chap, as fast as ever you can."

Baby Archibald clasped the square envelope, and then he felt himself being swept up into the air, and over the hedge into the familiar garden. The next instant he was scampering over the strawberry beds as fast as a pair of short, none too steady legs could carry him.

Fortunately, David was not there to witness this culminating crime against his protégés, and Baby Archibald reached the drawing-room unhindered. Fortunately, too, he did not stop to listen, for if he had he would undoubtedly have turned back. As it was, he pushed his way through the heavy curtains, and then waited, not knowing what to do, and feeling rather frightened.

Mrs. Dechesney sat by the window, with her gloved hands folded uncompromisingly over the handle of her parasol. In spite of her decided expression, Baby Archibald, in the light of his new knowledge, saw that she had undoubtedly fairylike characteristics. There was, for instance, a lacy daintiness about her dress which betrayed her. Only the golden wand was missing. Baby Archibald supposed she had it up her sleeve.

"You see, I am quite determined," she was saying. "I quite understand your feelings, but you must see for yourself that things cannot go on like this. I do not want to be brutal, but another thousand pounds should really prove to you how mistaken you are in not giving yourselves and the boy a chance. And, besides"—she looked round the old-fashioned, hopelessly in-

artistic room with a faint disparagement—"as I know you, Cecilia, you won't stand this sweet simplicity for more than a fortnight."

Mrs. Hunter, who reclined on the plush sofa, raised her eyebrows in displeasure.

"I do not see why Cecilia should not be perfectly happy in her old home," she said stiffly. "She has everything she can possibly want."

"And, anyhow, there is no need to talk any more about it," her daughter interrupted. "I have just heard from Heathcote, Adelaide, and he says that he has an excellent position, and no doubt as soon as he has got everything ready for us the baby and I will return to him."

"I don't believe a word of it!" Mrs. Hunter broke in. "Heathcote is simply humbugging you. What respectable firm would give him an excellent position, pray? He knows nothing, and is nothing but a——"

"Mother, I will not have my husband spoken of like that!" Mrs. St. John rose, and faced her mother with fiery indignation. "I have the greatest confidence in Heathcote. I shall go home to him at once. I cannot stand it any longer. A wife's place is at her husband's side."

Mrs. Dechesney gave an annoyed laugh.

"Really, Cecilia, what a dreadful platitude! And suppose your 'place,' as you call it, were in a back alley, would you still be of that opinion?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that at the present moment Heathcote is driving a hansom cab for the cab owners, Jenkins & Jenkins. It may be an excellent position. It has, at least, the advantage of being very original."

Mrs. St. John sat down as suddenly as she had got up. All the color had gone out of her cheeks.

"It's not true!" she said faintly.

"My dear, it's perfectly true. He drove me to the station the other day, and I had an argument with him about the fare. He didn't know I recognized him, but I did."

Mrs. Hunter threw up her hands.

"How dreadful!" she exclaimed, with extreme satisfaction. "I thought as much. You see, Cecilia——"

"Don't!" Mrs. St. John clasped her hands together in an agony of humiliation and despair. "How could he have done such a thing? How could he?"

There was a moment's silence. Mrs. Dechesney's face was twisted into an expression which was a strange mingling of satisfaction, disappointment, amusement, and disgust.

"At any rate, you see there is nothing to expect from that quarter," she said at last. "I don't want to press you, Cecilia, but really, if you want to save the situation there is nothing for it but for you to accept my offer. Mrs. Smythe has already seen your husband, and the scandal——"

"I shall never forgive him!" Mrs. St. John interrupted wildly. "Never! And I shall never go back to him!" At that moment her eye chanced to fall on Baby Archibald, who in his perplexity was trying to balance on one leg, and failing disastrously. "Come here, Archibald!" she said. "What are you doing there? And what have you got in your hand?"

He came forward shyly, keeping a wide berth between his grandmother and himself, and a watchful eye on Mrs. Dechesney, whom he now knew to be capable of anything.

"It's a letter—for you, mother," he said.

"Who gave it you?"

"A gob—a person, mother."

"Don't be silly, Archibald! Give it me!"

He obeyed, and she tore the letter open impatiently. The next moment she was on her feet, her eyes wide open with alarm.

"It's from a friend of my husband's!" she said jerkily. "He says Heathcote has been very ill—a bad cold and the night air—he never did wrap up properly. Oh, what shall I do?"

Mrs. Dechesney looked indifferent. Mrs. Hunter made a sound which in vulgar circles would have been called a sniff.

"I have really no idea," she said. "A man who degrades himself and his whole family by taking a low position is——"

"It isn't a low position! I must go to him at once. There is a train in half an hour. Adelaide, you will take me in your carriage, won't you?"

"No, I won't!" Mrs. Dechesney was really very angry, and Baby Archibald fully expected the golden wand to appear and turn his mother into a cabbage, or something equally unattractive. But, instead, the hard face relaxed unwillingly. "I suppose I must," Mrs. Dechesney said. "You are perfectly mad, Cecilia, but I suppose it must be in the family."

"It is nothing of the sort!" Mrs. Hunter rose indignantly, and prepared to follow her daughter out of the room. "At least—not on my side!"

And with this Parthian shot at her absent husband she sailed off in all the majesty of righteous anger.

Baby Archibald lingered a moment. He looked up at Mrs. Dechesney, and Mrs. Dechesney looked down at him, and there was a moment's awkward silence.

"Well?" she said, at last. "What is it?"

"I was wondering about your golden wand," he said, with his head a little on one side. "Didn't you want to use it, or couldn't you?"

"What golden wand, you absurd little boy?"

"The gob—somebody told me you had a golden wand, which you thought could make everybody do what you wanted," he explained. "But he said it couldn't, and it can't, can it?"

Mrs. Dechesney turned away. Her expression was grim.

"Whoever your 'somebody' is, he must be an extremely foolish person," she said.

CHAPTER XII.

Heathcote St. John was trying to shave himself. If you have been accustomed to a French valet, who rejoices in the name of Charles, it is a serious business to undertake such a

task by yourself. Add on the discomforts of a back room in a back alley with a slanting roof, no light to speak of, and a broken mirror, and the task becomes almost impossible.

Heathcote cut himself twice before he at length succeeded, and then he sat down on the one chair, and waited for his temper to come back. That took about five minutes, and then he went on, patiently carrying about the remnant of his glass from one side of the attic to another, in the endeavor to make the most of what little light came through the tiny window.

Now and again he stopped to look at himself with a sort of objective interest. The change in him was of a remarkable though subtle kind. He was thinner—almost haggard; there was not an ounce of superfluous flesh anywhere about him, and his hands, which he examined with a rueful grimace, were red with work. But the greater change lay in his expression. The eyes were alert and keen-looking, the well-cut lips had learned to close themselves in a line of decision and energy, and he held himself erect. The old languid indifference, the air of almost stupid good nature, the stooping gait, had vanished. In a word, the dandy had become a man of action, though he had not left his dandyism wholly behind him. Indeed, he took the usual care of his tie, and was extraordinarily particular as to the spotless condition of his sporting coat.

The latter had a tin disk fastened in the buttonhole, which disk announced that the owner was No. 3505, and seemed to cause Heathcote a certain amount of grim amusement. He arranged it at all sorts of different positions, and then, when it was adjusted to his satisfaction, he took a top hat from a box under the truckle bed, brushed it carefully, and donned it at a somewhat rakish angle.

"I'd like to see the old lady who'd resist me now!" he said, with a boyish chuckle.

"If you please, sir, tea is ready."

Heathcote opened the low door, and shook his finger threateningly.

"Tilda, if you call me 'sir' again, something awful will happen to you. I'm coming in a moment."

He went back to the table, and, snatching up a letter, thrust it in his pocket, and ran down the rickety stairs after Tilda's disappearing figure. He reached the Jenkins' parlor almost at the same time as she did, and burst into the tiny room like a storm of March wind.

"Now, then, Mother Jenkins, give me a cup of something, quick! The horse is waiting, and I've got ten bob to make before midnight. H'm, you can cook, mother!"

"Lor', sir, that ain't nothin'. A cup o' tea's easy to make."

"Oh, is it? Then I wonder why my one-hundred-pound cook couldn't manage it. But look here, if either of you two call me 'sir' again I shall—'pon my word, I don't know what I shall do. Imagination won't run to it. Now, mother, just you cast an eye over me, and calculate how many tips I shall get out of your sex to-night."

Mrs. Jenkins folded her arms over her ample bosom, and considered him carefully, a beam of pride spreading over her round, good-natured, if rather toil-worn, face.

"You'll do fine," she said, gulping down a forbidden "sir." "You're the smartest man I've ever seen on the ranks even in the good old days. I tell you, then there was one or two tidy chaps, but since then these taxis—"

"Yes, yes, I know, mother. But I'm going to knock sparks out of the taxis yet, just you see if I don't. Good-by, both, and pray for me that I don't run over a policeman."

Tilda followed him downstairs. She was, if possible, a shade more disorderly than in her Portman Square days, but her plain face radiated an entirely new expression of intelligence.

"Please, 'ave you 'eard, sir?" she asked timidly, as she stood at his side in the yard, and watched him as he drew on his driving gloves. "I 'ope you'll forgive me, sir, but I'm that anxious."

"No, I've not heard," Heathcote answered, too absorbed to notice the of-

fending title. "And you needn't mind asking me. Since you and your people have been so good to me you've a right to know my affairs—you especially. You're a first-rate pal, and a sort of guardian angel all wrapped up in one parcel, Tilda, and I'm awfully grateful. Here, do help do up this confounded glove, will you?"

Tilda obeyed, her clumsy fingers struggling desperately with a refractory button and buttonhole.

"And you've written to her, sir?"

"Yes. I wish to Heaven I hadn't! I suppose by this time she has found out that her husband is a shocking liar, and has given him the final go-by. If my respected mother-in-law has a word to say in the matter, it's sure. The Hunters never had a cabby in their family, and they won't want to begin now."

"But wot lies?" demanded Tilda, plunging at the root of the business, and tearing off a button.

"Tilda, you're no good as a valet, I'm afraid. My dear, it was what you ladies call a 'white lie.' I told her I had a splendid position—and so I have, from my point of view, and considering what a hopeless ass I am, but she won't think so. My reasons for so lying are complicated; you'd have to be rather hard hit yourself to understand them. Partly I didn't want her to worry about me, but the chief reason was—well, I didn't want her to know what an—infernal failure her husband is."

"You a failure!" Tilda shook with indignation. "You're just fust-rate, sir, and the woman 'o 'as you for 'er man can thank 'er lucky stars."

Heathcote gave a rather forced laugh.

"It's very kind of you to say so, Tilda, but unfortunately everybody isn't of that opinion. That's all right, Mr. Jenkins, I'm ready."

The last remark was addressed to a burly individual in shirt sleeves, who appeared, leading a horse out of the stables. By a certain vagueness in his expression, and an absence of any decided feature in his face, he was easily to be recognized as Tilda's father.

"'Ere you are, mister. I've given you my Bess to-night. She's my best 'oss, wot I don't let no one drive but meself, but I knows you're a gent wot hunderstands 'orseflesh, so I trusts you."

"That's good of you, Mr. Jenkins. I hope Bess will bring me luck."

With a briskness which would have surprised himself a few weeks before, Heathcote set about harnessing the horse to the waiting hansom, and five minutes later, amid admiring "ohs" and "ahs" from the watching hostlers, he drove out of the mews, and waved a last farewell before he turned into the street.

Five minutes afterward Heathcote was walking his horse slowly along Baker Street. In spite of his jaunty get-up, he was feeling depressed and miserable. Firstly, it was a dull, gray evening; secondly, he was beginning to realize that he was very much alone; thirdly, he had a confession in his pocket, stamped and addressed to one Mrs. Heathcote St. John; fourthly, he knew what she would do when she received it.

The fourth cause of his depression was the worst. Not that she would not be perfectly within her rights. He was without doubt a hopeless failure, and he would never attempt to hold her to him, but—but he wished to Heaven that things had been different, that he had made his own way from the beginning, that his uncle had never been born, finally that he had not fallen in love with his wife just when he was on the point of losing her.

The last thought made him wince. It had come almost as a revelation to him—this falling in love with a woman he had imagined he had loved for years. It was as though he had learned to know the depths of things for the first time, when it was too late.

By this time he had reached Waterloo Station.

And then suddenly a familiar voice fell on his ear, and he sat up in his box as though he had received the full contents of an electric battery.

"No, Cecilia, I won't take a taxi. I

don't like them. I'm old-fashioned, and I like to know exactly what is happening to me. With these newfangled machines, one can't possibly tell. Now, here's a nice-looking horse. Cabman!"

Heathcote looked down out of the corner of his eye, and kept his perch with a great effort. It was Mrs. Dechesney, his wife, and Baby Archibald.

"Yes, ma'am," he said faintly, and thanked Heaven for the dusk. "Where to, ma'am?"

"First to Portman Square."

"Yes, ma'am."

There was no need for him to try and disguise his voice—it was hoarse with horror—and for the next five minutes his thoughts were in a state which might be mildly described as chaotic. Indeed, it seemed to him that only a miracle could have brought them safely out of the crowded station, and had it not been for the knowledge that the cab contained all that was dear to him, he would probably have lost what little presence of mind that was left him, and driven into the first motor bus. As it was, he turned into the quieter streets, and hoped that at least Bess would have sense enough to keep them from disaster.

Then he tried to think clearly. The whole thing was too impossible—too awful. He lifted the trapdoor cautiously, and peeped down. He caught a glimpse of his wife's hat, the tip of her nose, and a stray curl belonging to Baby Archibald, who was apparently fast asleep, and the sight gave him such a peculiar thrill of pleasure that he looked again, and was caught in the act.

"What's the matter, cabman?" Mrs. Dechesney asked sharply.

"Nothing, ma'am. I was only looking to see if—if you were still there," was the feeble answer, and the trapdoor went down with a bang.

"The man's mad," said Mrs. Dechesney.

The "man" thought so himself. Or, if he was not mad, he stood before a most horrible, or, what was worse, a most ludicrous situation. It was clear to him that his wife had received his letter, and, encouraged by the "splendid

situation," had come back to London to take up her old place in the world. He had deceived her, and she was going to find him out, in an hour, or perhaps sooner, as a failure who had burlesqued as success, a useless creature who had sunk to the bottom of the social scale. It was true—he had meant to confess to her, but it is one thing to make a dignified confession, and another to be found out in *flagrante delicto*. Undoubtedly she would despise him—or laugh at him.

The thought was intolerable. By the time he reached Portman Square, he was ready to forsake his post, and make a dash for safety. But escape was impossible. Mrs. Dechesney descended the step with a dignity marked by displeasure.

"I hope you will never regret it, Cecilia," she said severely. "At any rate, remember that my offer is still open to you. Good night!"

"Good night, Adelaide!"

The trapdoor was then pushed up by a daintily gloved hand, which Heathcote had much ado not to seize hold of. He was torn between a wild delight and a horrible sense of the coming catastrophe. He felt he could never let her go again, and he wished the earth would open and swallow him up.

"Cabby!"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I want you to take me to a shop."

"Eh—what sort of shop?"

"Oh, you know—where you can buy everything—food, and wine, and cigars, and clothes."

"A—a stores, ma'am?"

"Yes, that will do."

Heathcote turned his horse slowly round. At any rate, this was a reprieve. Perhaps at the shop she would dismiss him, and then at least he would escape the full humiliation of his discovery. The hope buoyed him up, but was doomed to destruction. Mrs. Heathcote St. John merely nodded at him as she left the cab.

"You'll wait there, cabman?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He caught a glimpse of her upturned face, and, for no particular reason, lost

his nerve completely. No sooner had she disappeared behind the glass doors than he whipped up his horse, and swerved wildly out of the big thoroughfare into a side street. An enraged policeman shouted all the anathemas of the law after him, he narrowly escaped a coster's cart, but he never drew rein until three miles lay between him and his avenging fate.

Then he pulled up, and allowed his panting horse breathing space, and himself a moment's thought. Obviously the first thing his wife would do would be to go to the *poste-restante* address he had given her, and obviously the best thing he could do would be to get there first, and leave his miserable confession to await her arrival. Afterward he would disappear quietly from her horizon. It was the only reparation he could make her.

He was about to act on the idea, when a stiff-looking gentleman of military aspect hailed him from the curb. Heathcote struggled against a strong inclination to make off a second time, but the reflection that he had not earned a penny so far brought him to his senses. After all, the job might be a short one, and as he knew his wife, she would be in the stores at least an hour. He would have time and to spare.

"Yes, sir?"

"Drive me to Euston as quickly as you can." The military gentleman put his foot on the step, and then fell back onto the pavement. "You silly fool! Why didn't you tell me you were engaged?"

"I'm—what?"

"Engaged, you jackass!"

Heathcote opened the trapdoor, and peered in. Then he sat back with a gasp.

"Good Lord!" he said. "I had forgotten!"

The Jenkins family were at supper when the door opened suddenly, and Heathcote stood on the threshold. He was very pale, his hat was at the back of his head, his tie under one ear, and in his arms he held a bundle wrapped in a horse rug.

"Save me, hide me, bury me, do something with me!" he said. "By this time the law's after me! I've kidnaped my own son!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"Number four-seven-six-aught Paddington."

"Number what?"

"Number four-seven-six-aught Paddington."

"All right—wait a moment."

Pause. Mrs. Dechesney frowned round the handsome library, and amused herself in the interval by playing nervously with a paper knife. Then the telephone bell rang again.

"Is that Greene & Greene?"

"Yes."

"This is Mrs. Dechesney, of Portman Square. I want to speak with Mr. Samuels at once."

"Mr. who?"

"Samuels."

Pause.

"Sorry, but no one of that name in this office."

"Nonsense—think again. Samuels—S-a-m-u-e-l-s—a short, heavy-looking man, with an ugly face."

"Sorry. Would Jones do? Answers to the description."

Mrs. Dechesney rang off. She was very angry, and she was just on the point of sitting down to write an indignant note to the head of the office to complain of the impertinence of its subordinates, when a discreet cough drew her attention to the fact that she was no longer alone. She turned round with a start, and found a short, heavy-looking man, with an ugly face, seated in her favorite chair, and smiling affably at her.

"Jeremy—Mr. Harris—Mr. Samuels, whatever are you doing there, and how did you get in?" she demanded, with the icy calm of a person who feels that he has reached the limit of all things.

Mr. Samuels' expression remained irrepressibly amiable.

"At present I am innocently doing nothing," he said. "I came in by the usual entrance—the door—and if you

didn't hear my knock it was because you were talking too loudly down the telephone. It's a bad habit of yours, Adelaide. You should remember that distinctness, not noise——"

Mrs. Dechesney waved her hand.

"Thank you. I have managed to make myself intelligible through a telephone for a considerable number of years without advice, and I hope to continue successfully to the end. All the same, I am glad you have come. As I suppose you heard, I have been inquiring for you at Greene & Greene's."

"I heard you asking for a short, heavy-looking man with an ugly face. I cannot believe that you meant me, Adelaide."

"The fact remains. Curiously enough, however, the firm did not even seem to know of your existence. Perhaps you can explain."

Mr. Samuels looked blank.

"I can't," he said.

"And yet you were in and out of the St. Johns' house for about a fortnight in the capacity of one of Greene & Greene's valuers. Really, Jer—Mr. Samuels!"

"I have nothing to be ashamed of," he protested doggedly.

"You were there under false pretenses."

"Yes—no—well, not exactly."

"Don't make matters worse." She looked at him with crushing disparagement. "It makes my blood run cold to think of it! You might have stolen something."

"I might. In fact"—his small, deep-set eyes wandered nervously round the room—"I did."

"You what?"

He fumbled in his coat pocket, and drew out a little packet in tissue paper, which he began to unwrap with an almost reverent care.

"You remember that the St. Johns had a little curio case, where they used to keep all sorts of more or less valuable odds and ends," he said. "The fellow who bought up their house and goods bought the case, too, and—well, I thought he wouldn't miss it. It hasn't much value."

"Show it me!"

He came over to her side, and put something that glittered on the library table. She looked at it closely, frowning, and then up into his grave face.

"I—I seem to remember it," she said.

"Yes, it was our engagement ring. I wondered if you would remember." She made no answer, but held the quaint-shaped emerald in the palm of her hand, and he went on quietly: "When you gave it back to me I was feeling too bitter to think much what I was doing. I sent it to Heathcote's father as a curio. A few weeks ago, when I saw it again, I was sorry. I wanted it. You see, I am going back to my old haunts, the gold fields, and——"

"You have an appointment?" she interrupted.

"Yes, not a bad one. But it is a desolate sort of place. I wanted to take something with me that would remind me. I am not young enough to look much into the future, Adelaide. A man of forty-five must content himself with the past."

"I ought to give you up to the police," she said.

"Will you? After all, it is a very little thing, and I was very tempted."

"Nonsense! You are trying to make me believe you still care——" She rose, almost violently, and her voice shook. "I suppose you have realized that my income has increased year by year!" she lashed out at him.

He nodded.

"I calculated that it would. You live very quietly, considering."

"You are at least frank!"

"My dear Adelaide, you know the workings of the human heart too well for me to attempt to impose upon you."

"Is that sarcasm?"

"Surely not!"

She sat down again, and composed herself with an effort.

"We have wandered from the point," she said. "When you came, I was trying to find out who wrote that letter to Mrs. St. John. Whoever he was, he could not have been a very respectable person. In the first place, the letter was anonymous——"

"Always a bad sign," Mr. Samuels put in.

"In the second place, it contained a most impertinent lie. There is nothing the matter with Heathcote, and there never will be. He has the constitution of an ostrich."

"Happy man!"

"When I began my search," Mrs. Dechesney went on, without regarding the interruption, "I made up my mind that I had to look for some one who has not the slightest respect for the truth. That made the search difficult. If it had been the other way round, the numbers of possible culprits would have been more limited. However, I presume that there is no necessity for my looking any farther?"

Mr. Samuels bowed.

"You wrote that letter?"

"Guilty!"

"There was no stamp or postmark on it. How did you send it?"

"By the grass orphan—Archibald, I mean."

"Where were you then?"

"Hiding behind the hedge."

A spasm passed over Mrs. Dechesney's features.

"You have no dignity, Jeremy," she said, in a muffled voice.

"I never had, Adelaide."

"Don't call me 'Adelaide.' Remember, I may still send for the police. Now go on. Why did you tell Cecilia that dreadful nonsense about Heathcote's being at death's door?"

"Well, it was a kind of gamble. You see, I guessed that you'd come down with your extra thousand pounds, and the story of Heathcote's cab-driving exploits, and I had to do something to counterbalance it. It was a risky bit of business, but I am accustomed to taking risks. As it happens, I won."

"That remains to be seen. You are sentimental, Jeremy. You always were, and you attach an absurd value to sentiment. I admit that you showed some perspicacity in sending that false alarm at the critical moment, but you are a fool to count on lasting effects. Do you really suppose that Cecilia will stand life in Harely Mews for an hour,

especially when she finds that she has been outrageously hoaxed?"

Mr. Samuels took out his watch.

"According to your theory, she ought to be leaving now," he said.

"I am expecting her every minute," Mrs. Dechesney retorted.

"Shall we wait twenty minutes, and then go round and see what is happening?" he suggested.

Mrs. Dechesney shrugged her shoulders.

"You take a great interest in the affair," she said. "A man in your condition——"

"Fallen condition," he put in. "I know you are longing to say it, and my feelings are accustomed to being hurt."

"Very well; in your fallen condition ought to have something better to do than to run round after other people's affairs."

"After all, Heathcote is my nephew," he protested.

"I should not mention the relationship, if I were in your place. He has no great reason for feeling much affection for you."

"You think not? He owes me a great deal."

"Indeed! Allow me to tell you that I consider the allowance you gave him was an absurdity, a downright crime. A young man like that ought to have made his way by himself. Your money ruined them both. Believe me, Heathcote is a changed man since your precious money was lost, and I should not be surprised if in this present misfortune those two did not come together. Jeremy, what are you laughing at?"

"I'm not laughing. I was only calculating that if you went upstairs to put on your bonnet you might be ready to start at the end of half an hour."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. I repeat, what does it matter to you whether Cecilia stands by her husband or not?"

He got up and faced her with a new gravity.

"It matters everything—to us both," he said. "We are both playing a last desperate game for the theories on which we have built our lives. One of

them is going to be proved to-night, and one of us has got to admit that he has made a muddle of things. If I'm the loser I'll clear out, and I won't worry you again. If I win——"

"Well?"

"I shall expect you to take this back."

He held out the emerald ring, and she stood holding the edge of the table, with her eyes fixed on his immovable face.

"Jeremy, you must be mad!" she stammered.

"No, I am not; or, if I am, to-night will prove it. My dear, it's no use your pretending you don't care. People of our caliber care once, and for always. I offer you nothing, and I shall not ask you to give up all your money to a dog's home to prove my disinterestedness. I only ask that you should trust me and marry me."

"Only!" she echoed, with biting sarcasm.

"Yes, only. There is nothing difficult or unpleasant about it, and at the bottom you know you want to."

She shook her head at him.

"Your audacity, or madness, or whatever it is, makes me perfectly speechless," she said.

"Then it has had the desired effect. Suppose you go and see about that bonnet?"

"I shall do nothing——"

"Please!"

She considered him for a moment in silence.

"Jeremy," she said, "you are without doubt the plainest man I have ever had the misfortune to meet; in fact, you are so plain that you are almost attractive. You can telephone for a cab."

CHAPTER XIV.

A curious procession made its way up the Jenkins' narrow stairs. Tilda went as advance guard, with a candle lifted well above her head for the benefit of her followers, who stumbled cautiously after her; then came Mrs. Jenkins, breathing hard with the unaccustomed exertion; Heathcote, with the bundle in the horse rug, came third; Mr. Jenkins, still in his shirt sleeves,

and as taciturn as ever, brought up the rear. Except for Mrs. Jenkins' breathing difficulties, and the squeaking of Mr. Jenkins' boots, there was a profound hush.

Once or twice, when the breathing and the squeaking grew too pronounced, Tilda glanced back reproachfully over her shoulder, and the two culprits rolled their eyes and screwed up their mouths to testify that they were quite aware of the solemnity of the occasion. On the landing a halt was called. The procession formed round Tilda, who had taken up the position of general manager quite as a matter of course, and apparently looked upon her previous acquaintance with the bundle in the horse rug as a reason for bullying every one else.

"Now, you go on, mother," she said. "Father, you're blocking the door. 'Ere, Mr. 'Eathcote, I'll lead the way."

She entered the little room, and Heathcote followed her, treading on tiptoe, as though afraid of waking his small burden. Next his own truckle bed against the wall Tilda had erected a long, boxlike concern which was to serve the new arrival as sleeping accommodation, and a cup of milk stood waiting on the unsteady little table.

"It's for the hangel when 'e wakes hup," Mrs. Jenkins explained, in a self-satisfied whisper. "'E'll want his supper bad, poor babby. And after that long journey, too!"

Very carefully and tenderly Heathcote laid his stolen possession on the improvised bed, and watched with admiring eyes as Tilda deftly removed the minute shoes and stockings from the tired feet. It was remarkable how swift and gentle the clumsy hands could be. The scared, bemuddled scullery maid from Portman Square had become a person of resource and purpose.

"Why, Tilda, I hardly know you!" Heathcote whispered. "You're a perfect miracle."

A broad smile relaxed the intent face. She had just pulled the quilt over Baby Archibald, and now stood back to admire the effect of her arrangements

"It makes a difference when you 'aven't got 'alf a dozen folk a-sittin' on your 'ead," she observed wisely. "That cook of yours she sent me 'alf crazy, Mr. 'Eathcote."

"It shan't happen again," he whispered back. "If ever I do rise to having a cook of my own again, you shall choose her, Tilda."

There was a silence while the cortège stood round the sleeping Baby Archibald, and wondered. Mrs. Jenkins had already expressed her opinion more than once that "there never 'ad been such a beautiful child before," and the same remark was now written all over her face. Even her husband, in defiance of his objecting boots, had ventured to draw nearer, and stood gazing down in absorbed interest.

"If that there kid were mine, I should send for a doctor," he burst out, so abruptly that there was a general start. "I don't fancy 'is color; 'tain't natural like."

"Get along, Samuel!" Mrs. Jenkins retorted. "Wot d'yer know about children? You don't know a pretty, pink, 'ealthy complexshon from measles, and that's the truth. You can go and look after your 'osses, man!"

Mr. Jenkins retired, offended.

"I've said my say, any'ow," he was heard to grumble from the doorway. "'Tain't natural."

Heathcote looked anxiously at Tilda. "You don't think——" he began.

"Not a bit of it, sir. 'E's as right as a trivit," came the reassuring answer. She put the candle behind the looking-glass, so that the light should not fall on the sleeper. "Won't you come down for a bite of supper, sir?"

"No, thanks, Tilda; I'd rather stay up here. He might be frightened if he woke up here alone."

"All right, sir. I'll bring you up a bit of something warm."

The door closed softly, and he heard the creaking of the stairs as the two kindly women crept down to the little parlor beneath. He was glad they had gone. He wanted to have his son all to himself, to look after him. It gave him a sense of proprietorship such as he had

never had before, and had never wanted to have. He no longer felt so intensely alone.

Very quietly he placed his chair at the foot of the makeshift bed, and, with his chin supported in his hand, watched and waited. As his eyes grew accustomed to the half darkness, he began to distinguish the baby features more clearly. It was almost as though he looked at his own son for the first time. He began to see that the small, flushed face was more than a face; it was the index to an unknown, mysteriously developing character which yet had its root, its very source in him—and in one other.

The thought caused him a shock that was half painful, half joyful. He realized that here lay the mighty link between them, a being that was part her, part himself. The signs of their union were written on the face where for the first time he recognized his own features—and hers. His memory, stirred by the resemblance, painted her for him in vivid colors standing beside the bed, as she had done on that first night when the catastrophe had broken over them. It was curious that he had begun to reckon his life from that hour. All that had gone before was vague and unreal, as though it concerned another man. He had begun to live and love when he had begun to struggle and suffer.

As he sat there, his thoughts wandered back irresistibly to his wife. He wondered what she was doing, what she was feeling. He had left messages at the police station, at his poste-restante address, and had sent round to Mrs. Dechesney, but as yet no answer had come. He imagined her wandering distracted along the crowded streets, and his whole heart went out to her in a helpless pity and love. He cursed himself as the unwilling cause of all her sorrows. She was not made to be unhappy, and he had made her so simply because he was a fool, a good-for-nothing.

He was still seeking vainly for fresh epithets to hurl at his own head, when Baby Archibald stirred restlessly, and groaned. The groan sent a thrill of

nameless alarm through Heathcote's wearied nerves. In an instant he was bending tenderly over the child.

"Hullo, Archie!" he whispered.

The boy's eyes opened, and smiled with a recognition that was yet veiled with pain.

"Hullo, father! Where's mummy?"

"She's—she's out. She'll be back soon."

"That's all right." He wriggled uncomfortably. "We were coming home, you know. Is this home?"

Heathcote bit his lip.

"Yes."

"It looks jolly—there ought to be lots of bears. Is mummy coming *very* soon?"

"Y-es. I hope so."

"I've got such a pain."

He looked up into his father's face, his own small features twisted into an expression which threatened tears. Heathcote paled visibly. He had never had a pain in his life. Horrible visions of internal complications, appendicitis, operations, deaths, and burials rose up before his mental vision.

"Where is it, little chap?" he asked tremulously.

"It's everywhere," came back the equally unsteady answer.

"You're sure it's not here—where I'm pressing?"

"No—it's everywhere." A long, lugubrious sniff.

Heathcote stood upright, and ran his shaking hand over his head. A pain that was everywhere went beyond his medical wisdom. If only Cecilia would come! If only he were not so horribly alone and helpless!

"Archie!" he said.

"Y-e-s."

"Are you very hot?"

"Boilin'."

"Does your—let me see—does your throat hurt you?"

"Dunno. I 'spects so." A pause, and then "I want my mother!" in loud, dolorous accents.

"You shall have her in a minute," Heathcote said soothingly.

The full realization of his own uselessness was beginning to dawn on him.

Even his son turned from him in moments of distress. He was without doubt a burden on the earth's surface. Archibald tossed in feverish restlessness.

"I want the goblin," he muttered feebly.

"The what?"

"The goblin. *He'd* put it right. Father, do ask him to come! It's such a pain!"

Heathcote groaned aloud. The child was evidently in a raging delirium. Not a moment was to be lost. He ran to the door, and tore it open.

"Cecilia!" he gasped.

Mrs. St. John entered. She was carrying a tray, and her sleeves were rolled up to the elbow.

"I have brought you your supper, Heathcote," she said calmly. "Tilda didn't want me to, but I thought you'd like it."

"When did you come?" he asked.

He was holding on to the edge of the table for support, wondering whether he was mad or not. His wife set down the tray, and looked at him. In the dim light he saw that she was pale—almost as though she had been crying—but there was laughter twinkling in the tired eyes.

"About half an hour ago," she said. "My boxes are coming by express delivery. Tilda is going to make up a bed for me in the attic." She put her head a little on one side. "You look quite nice in your shirt sleeves, Heathcote," she observed critically, "but not very clean. Can one get a bath here?"

"No—eh—yes—that is to say, there is a pump in the yard. Cecilia, how did you come here? How did you know?"

"I knew all along," she answered. "Mrs. Dechesney told me. Besides, I recognized you. It was too funny, being driven home by one's own husband. But you shouldn't have run away like that—and without your fare, too! I don't know for certain, but I think it was positively illegal."

"Why did you come?" he demanded hoarsely.

"My dear, if you ask so many questions, I shall begin to think you are not

pleased to see me. I came because I received a letter saying that you were very ill. Did you write it?"

"Cecilia! You might give me some credit! I wrote you an awful lot of lies, but I've never whined for pity!"

"Well, then, some one whined for you. Who was it?"

"I don't know."

"Do you recognize this writing?"

She handed him a crumpled letter, and he looked at it intently, a look of puzzled recollection dawning gradually over his face.

"It looks like—but it can't be. It's a disguised handwriting. Anyhow, it isn't me."

"You don't need to be so pious, Heathcote, and your grammar is shocking. I suppose it's all the result of your new profession." She came a little closer, and put her hand on his shoulder. "Is this the 'splendid position'?" she asked, with a gentle mockery.

"Cecilia, don't rub it in. I know—it was unpardonable, but it hurt like the devil. You won't understand—it was the humiliation." He met her eyes with the courage of despair. "I wanted you to care, to—to respect me a little—and it seems"—he laughed miserably—"it seems I'm not respectable."

"Heathcote!"

A small, complaining sigh interrupted her. She turned quickly.

"It's Archie," Heathcote said, remorse-stricken. "He's got an awful pain, poor little chap. I was just going to fetch some one when you came."

He followed her to the bedside, and they bent over together. Baby Archibald's eyes opened heavily, but lightened for a moment.

"Oh, mummy," he said, "I am so glad you've come. And father's here, too. It's so nice. You're not going away any more, are you?"

Mrs. St. John turned her head a little. Husband and wife looked at each other. Mr. St. John's hand glided along the edge of the box, and touched another and smaller hand. He tried to look as though the contact was accidental, but his eyes betrayed him. Mrs.

St. John's mouth trembled at the corners—whether with tears or laughter he could not be sure.

"No, I am not going away any more, whatever happens," she said. "I don't think we three can get on without each other, somehow."

Then, without any further ado, the big red hand grasped the small white one, and held it without apology.

"And I've got such a pain!" said Baby Archibald, returning to the matter of real importance. "Such a pain, mummy!"

Instantly Mrs. St. John was all attention.

"Where, darling?" she asked tenderly.

"It's everywhere," Heathcote hastened to explain. "And he's feverish, and rather strange altogether. I——"

"You'd better go for a doctor, then. Be quick! I'll stay here and take care of him."

Heathcote snatched up his cap, and ran out of the room. He was stumbling about on the landing, trying to find the wooden banisters, when a hand caught him by the sleeve.

"You've forgotten your coat, Heathcote," his wife said. "How thoughtless you are! Please remember in the future that you are now a breadwinner, and that I—we cannot afford to lose you."

There was a moment's silence. They could not see each other, but it was as though something finer than a hand was feeling through the darkness—some all-powerful, all-divining instinct.

"Cecilia," he said brokenly, "it's such a rotten life. I've dragged you down with me. You won't be able to bear it."

"I shall bear it better than separation from you. And you haven't dragged me down. We've climbed whole mountains since that first awful night, and we are going to go on climbing—together. It's been an awful time, but it has taught us the real value of things; it has taught me to love you both better, Heathcote." She put her head against his shoulder, and he kissed her wildly. "I am so happy," she said, with a tired sigh.

"My own wife!"

"My dear, dear husband!"

There was a very long silence, indeed. And then—

"I think you had better go now for the doctor," Mrs. St. John said gently.

CHAPTER XV.

It was about half past nine at night when two mysteriously shrouded figures made their way stealthily over the cobbles of Harely Mews. That they were strangers was obvious, for they seemed very uncertain as to their destination, and the lady of the party picked her way with a disgust which suggested unfamiliarity with such a state of things.

"Really, this is the most extraordinary adventure I have ever indulged in!" she said. "I think we had all better go and live in the slums, and have done with it. I thought you knew the road, Jeremy?"

"So I do, only it's so confoundedly dark. Ah, here we are—number eleven. Shall I knock?"

"Do what you like. You know the etiquette of these regions better than I do."

Mr. Samuels knocked, and presently the door was hesitatingly opened. The light of a candle revealed an embarrassed and grinning Tilda and a good-looking hostler, who was leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets, trying unsuccessfully to appear at his ease.

"Evening, Tilda," said Mr. Samuels, with one foot in the doorway. "Is Mr. St. John at home?"

"Yes, sir, hupstairs. If you please, sir, as you're a friend, I—I'd like to hintroduce you. This is Mr. Jakes. 'E's—we—are——"

She broke off in a nervous giggle, and Mr. Jakes came to the rescue.

"She means that we've gone and got fiancéed, mister," he said. "And about time, too, ain't it, Tilly?"

Mr. Samuels brought his hand down on Mr. Jakes' shoulders with a hearty slap.

"Congratulate you, sir! You've got a jewel, I can tell you! Tilda, I shall

have to stump up a handsome wedding present, shan't I? But I suppose that can wait a bit. Is Mrs. St. John here?"

"Yes, sir, hupstairs with Mr. 'Eathcote."

Mr. Samuels looked back over his shoulder.

"Either your watch or your theory is wrong," he said. "Cecilia is still here."

"Don't be impertinent, Jeremy," came back the answer out of the darkness.

"I'll try not to be. Tilda, can we go upstairs?"

"I'll go up and see, sir. They're in a hawful state of mind. Master Harchibald is hill."

"What!" Mrs. Dechesney had pushed her companion out of the doorway. "Ill, did you say?"

"Yes, ma'am, very hill. They're waiting for the doctor. Master Harchibald has got hawful pains everywhere, and is a-wandering in 'is 'ead. 'E's always a-hasking after goblins, and such like 'orrors."

"Let me go upstairs at once. This is terrible."

Mrs. Dechesney did not wait for the permission, but went up as fast as her dignity and the steepness of the stairs allowed. Mr. Samuels followed at her heels.

"It's the first door to the left," Tilda called up from the lower regions. "You can't miss it."

On the landing, Mrs. Dechesney paused to take breath.

"Jeremy," she said, "you know it is not in my nature to apologize, but if I have been unjust in this matter—if, in fact, I have been mistaken and misjudged these people—and—and others—I *shall* apologize."

"I shall expect you to do a lot more than that," said Mr. Samuels.

To avoid the necessity of answering, Mrs. Dechesney opened the door. She had forgotten to knock, and it was her fault entirely, therefore, that she found Mrs. St. John sitting on Mr. St. John's knee. It was a most bourgeois situation, but fortunately neither of the guilty parties seemed to mind very much.

"You see, there is only one chair,"

Mrs. St. John explained, rising. "It's very good of you to come, Adelaide, but please be very quiet. Archie is ill."

"Yes, so I have heard. I am thankful I came. Mr.—er—Samuels brought me."

Cecilia looked at the square-shouldered figure standing in the shadow.

"Oh, yes, I remember," she said, rather doubtfully. "Of Greene & Greene's, aren't you?"

Mr. Samuels executed an awkward bow.

"The same, ma'am, at your service."

"And my very good friend," Heathcote put in heartily. "Mr. Samuels, your propensity for driving in hansoms and distributing extravagant tips shall always be held in grateful remembrance."

A small, pathetic groan reduced the assembly to an abject silence. Mrs. Dechesney drew nearer, and her voice sank to a whisper.

"Cecilia," she said, "you and your husband cannot possibly go on like this; it will kill that baby, and I am, as you know, absurdly fond of the child. I should be grateful—in fact, I should look upon it as a personal favor, if you all would make my house your home—unconditionally—now and for always, if you like."

"Bravo!" murmured Mr. Samuels from the background.

Mrs. St. John shook her head.

"It's awfully good of you, Adelaide, and perhaps we shall accept for a few days, until we get things straight, but we are in no real need of help. Something wonderful has happened. Heathcote, you tell!"

Mr. St. John came forward. He held an open letter in his hand.

"I have just heard from Uncle Jeremy," he said. "It seems the old chap has been playing some sort of a game at our expense, and he's not ruined at all. In fact, it was he who bought our house in Portman Square."

"Oh! Now I understand!" Mrs. Dechesney ejaculated. "It's a great relief to me," she added severely to the shadow in the background. "Go on, Heathcote, this is most interesting. I always

knew that Jeremy Harris was mad, but am glad to find he is not a thief."

"There appears to have been method in the old josser's madness, anyhow," said Heathcote, referring to the letter. "He seems to think that his money wasn't doing us any good, and, 'pon my soul, I believe he was right. At any rate, now that he has proved what stuff we are made of, he has offered to give us back our old house and our old funds, or, failing that—in case we have grown to love our independence—a partnership for me in his mining business in South Africa. I've decided for the latter, and, by Jove, if I get the chance, I shall work like a——"

"You'll get the chance right enough, I promise you," said a grim voice. "Nephew, I congratulate you on your choice."

Heathcote started violently.

"Who the—— Who said that?" he demanded.

Mr. Samuels came forward into the light.

"I did, young man," he said. "I'm the old josser."

"You—Mr. Samuels—uncle—it isn't possible——"

"Oh, yes, it is. Now, don't get excited. You might wake Archibald, and you owe that child more than you know. It was he who gave me the hint about you two, and the state of things between you, and I made up my mind for his sake to set 'em right. Shake hands, nephew, and give me a kiss, niece. You're not angry with the old man, are you?"

"I feel far too bewildered to feel angry with any one," said Mrs. St. John. Nevertheless, she recovered from the shock quickly enough to return his embrace with sincere warmth. "And I hope you'll forgive me if I ever said anything rude about you to your face. I couldn't have known, could I?"

"Of course not. And you can go on saying rude things, if you want to. I dare say I deserve them."

He went over to where Mrs. Dechesney was standing, and planted himself before her.

"Adelaide!" he said.

"Yes, Mr. Harris?"

"Do you admit that you were very unjust to them—and to me?"

"Jeremy, is this a catechism?"

"Do you?"

"Y-es."

"Do you trust me now?"

"Yes, I suppose I must."

"And aren't you sorry you've wasted all these years?"

"Jeremy, I refuse to be bullied!"

"Aren't you?"

"Perhaps it was rather a pity."

"Are you or are you not sorry?"

"Jeremy, you are—— Yes, I am, a little."

He held out something which glittered, and put it on her finger.

"It's taken me twenty years, but I've done it at last," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction. "I think, Adelaide, you can give up your house in Portman Square. One will be enough for us now."

"Jeremy——"

Her objections were satisfactorily quashed by the entrance of Tilda, whose scared face announced the arrival of the doctor. A short, fussy-looking little man stood on the threshold, and gazed short-sightedly about him, apparently rather bewildered by the strange contrast in poverty and wealth which confronted him.

"I was sent for in a great hurry," he said. "Will you kindly tell me——"

"Here is your patient," said Heathcote, as though he felt there might be some doubt in the matter. "He has been in great pain, and we are very anxious about him."

As though to confirm his statements, a pathetic groan came from Baby Archibald's direction, and a hush fell on the assembly. The little doctor approached the bed. All the new-found happiness hung in suspense as he made his examination. Heathcote, white to the lips, had put his arm round his wife's waist, as though to support her in the hour of danger. Jeremy Harris had tiptoed with Mrs. Dechesney to the other side of the bed, and Tilda, who had retired

to the passage, swallowed sobs in loud, melancholy gulps.

When the doctor looked up there was a general stiffening. Each in his own way prepared himself to meet the worst.

The doctor's face was scarlet.

"Where is the mother of this child?" he demanded.

"Here," said Mrs. St. John, trembling. "I am."

"Then, madam, might I inquire how many pounds of strawberries you have allowed your son to consume daily?"

Mrs. St. John clung to her husband in stricken silence.

"And to think," said the doctor, "that I should have been disturbed to look after a child who has overeaten himself!" He stalked angrily to the door. "Good night!"

"And the prescription?" said Heathcote, feeble with laughter and relief.

"Endeavor not to overfeed him for the next twenty-four hours!" the little medico snarled, and the door closed with a bang.

"And, after all, I have the best prescription," said Jeremy Harris.

He bent over Baby Archibald, who had fallen into a light doze.

"Grass orphan!" he said gently.

The sleepy eyes opened for a moment.

"Hullo, goblin!"

"I just wanted to tell you that you aren't a grass orphan any more. You run the risk of becoming the most spoiled brat that was ever born, and it will take all my magic to save you. But, anyhow, it's all right now." His voice sank to a whisper. "The fairy has given up her golden wand," he said. "She sees it's no good against my charm. Your father and mother love you and each other. Have I done my job well? Are you satisfied?"

"Rather!"

"Pain better?"

"Yes—thank you."

"Good night, whilom grass orphan!"

"Good night, goblin."

The weary eyelids fell. Baby Archibald slept the sleep of the just and happy.